THE DAWN MEADOW

G. A. DENNEN

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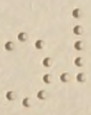

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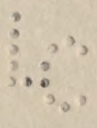
To my dear sister Jeanne
this book is lovingly
dedicated



THE DAWN MEADOW

Chapter I

THE Sierras are full of surprises. Saw-toothed and ragged, they stretch their mighty bulk lengthwise of the continent. In winter they present a solid front of snow, ten feet on the level, to the winds that sweep across the plains. But at the first touch of spring they begin to reveal beauties that they have hidden from us, like hearts capable of the noblest friendship, until better acquaintance. Then the leaves come out on the alders; the dainty azaleas begin to bud. Snow plants show the first scarlet blooms, and leafy tangles make a harmony of freshest green.

But the sweetest of all the Sierras' surprises are the mountain meadows, set often among the most forbidding cliffs. They are watered by streams of melted snow until they are like emeralds in the richness of their coloring, starred with flowers, and fringed with sugar pines, firs, or aspens. All the spring days, that lengthen on into the summer, these meadows are flooded with sunshine and bathed in the trickle of a thousand tiny rivulets. To stumble upon one of them among rough cliffs, guarded by its calm, uplifted pines, is like finding one's way back for a little to the dawn of life—

it is so fresh, so newly created, so set apart and overflowing with vernal sunshine and warm air that tangs with life in the nostril. To one who lingers in such a spot there is neither yesterday nor tomorrow. Only *today* calls, holding in its arms the gifts of health, long thoughts, free sky, and silence.

Mrs. Onverell might always be counted upon to do the unexpected thing. It was this quality in her which charmed people most, unless they happened to be depending upon her for something. Then admiration was mingled with other feelings. This quality, more than any other, made her a social leader in San Francisco, city of the unexpected and the bizarre. Strange extremes met in her; she combined a real love of nature, the life of wood and stream, with a passion for dress, frivolities, and crowded streets.

It was also Mrs. Onverell's talent for the unexpected that laid the foundation for this story. In one of the most inaccessible corners of the Sierras, approached only by the narrowest of horseback trails, which ran perilously along the edge of a great cliff, lay one hundred and twenty acres of lovely mountain meadow. Cliffs surrounded it for a thousand feet or more on all sides. Mrs. Onverell had stumbled on it, by chance, during a hunting expedition with her husband. Its beauty and isolation caught at her heart-strings, for it was the season with her when the needle of her

nature pointed toward the open. There was only one possible inlet to the little retreat which lay like a jewel among its pointed facets. This was by way of crawling underneath a gigantic, overhanging rock, whence they emerged, dusty and breathless, on the further side.

They stood and looked at it with exclamations of delight, captive at once to its charm. Majestic granite walls clasped it on every side so securely that, without artificial trails, only wild animals could find a way up or down. On the north these cliffs were sculptured into domes and battlements of rare beauty, fifteen hundred feet high. Hardy junipers had found a scanty but secure foothold upon the shoulders of these northern cliffs, and every ridge that cut their surface was the home of wonderful brakes and ferns, shoulder high. The centre of the basin was a waving lawn of greenest grass, already starred with wild flowers; its shores were tall groves of pine and fir.

"What a little paradise!" cried Mrs. Onverell. "Buy it for me and we'll build a bungalow, where we can come whenever we get tired of the world."

"Big Jim," as those who knew him called the six-foot fellow, had the nature of a nice, clean-minded boy. He had not been married long enough, even in ten years, to have gotten over the wonder of it. Far more knowledge of the world and its ways looked out from her soft blue eyes than from his brown ones. In their household

her will was to him a beautiful law. It was the same to her, and so they achieved a oneness of mind that made for harmony. Jim accepted his happiness without question, and never analyzed it to see if it could be bettered.

The suggestion of a little refuge, where they could come and be together, touched him so deeply that the quick moisture came to his eyes.

"You wouldn't be lonely?" he questioned her as one who would be contradicted. "It's awfully far away and quiet."

"Far away!" she exclaimed, nestling close to him with a little shiver, "I should say it was far away! If that great boulder should fall we'd be as much cut off from the rest of the world as if we'd never been created. That's what makes it so nice and different."

"It might be managed," said Jim, reflectively, "if we could blast that entrance wide enough without upsetting the boulder. The lumber could be packed up on burros, and there's rock enough at hand for all the foundation and chimneys and pillars we want."

"You'll do it, Jim?" she pleaded.

"H'm, it would be a difficult proposition—a matter of months, probably—"

"But I want it!"

"Well, Mayme, we'll see."

Of course he built her the bungalow. Thereupon it became a nine days' topic at luncheon or

reception, and all Mrs. Onverell's friends commented, criticised, and envied. Mrs. Onverell was possessed of sufficient energy and initiative to make all her doings full of interest, and the exclusive little house-parties that she began at once to give became astonishingly popular. Soon it was no unusual thing for social leader or society bud to leave innumerable engagements and go for a considerable journey by train and horseback to the little mountain meadow.

Mrs. Onverell planned her parties regardless of times or seasons, whenever the call of the open sounded in her heart. So it surprised nobody that the very height of Grand Opera season should find her with face set toward the mountains. Caruso had never been in better voice. Sembrich and Gadski were drawing the suburbanites in crowds to the city. She had secured a box for the season and had enjoyed the first two performances as they merited. Then, quite suddenly, as Onverell helped her out of the carriage on the second night, her mood changed.

"Jim, we're going to give a house-party over Sunday," she declared. "Perhaps that will help me to get decently through with the woes of those Wagner people. They sing theirs to an audience. I want to go and tell mine to the birds and squirrels."

"But—" said Jim.

"You need a rest. You are killing yourself with business."

Onverell smiled whimsically. "You won't find any one to go with you this week," he said.

"Oh, yes, I will. There's Mrs. Vance. She's crazy to get away from all her relatives-in-law, who are trying to break things up between her and Fred. Then there's Ethel Stanton. Her people are doing the Orient, and she told me tonight that she couldn't keep up the social pace any longer. She said she'd rather have a good night's sleep than to hear an all-star cast sing her favorite opera. She's longing to commune with Nature."

"You'd better bring Bob Forrest along then."

"Ah, sits the wind in that quarter?"

"Decidedly. Bob can fish with me by day and make love to Ethel in the evening. We'll be helping along a very pretty romance."

"It's all right, is it, Jim? Ethel is born to the purple, you know."

"Oh, Forrest is all right. He puts through some of the biggest real estate deals in the city. He belongs to all the best clubs; he's no end of a good fellow."

"Ask him, then, by all means. Perhaps we'll have another 'engagement of interest' to announce on our return."

"I fancy it's an accomplished fact already. Ethel's father has been keen on it for some time. He thinks Forrest is bound to be a big man, and he wants to see Ethel settled."

"Tell him to be ready by Thursday," said Mrs. Onverell.

Chapter II

THIS was how it happened that a party of four found themselves on the veranda of Mrs. Onverell's mountain bungalow about sunset of Thursday, the seventeenth of April. Only four, for Mrs. Vance had weakened at the last moment. The bungalow was a long and rather rambling structure of battened boards, left to be stained by time and weather. Its great beauty lay in the massive rock foundation and supporting pillars, which made it seem a natural outgrowth of its surroundings. The house was deceptively luxurious in its appointments. The broad veranda was as large as a living room, and was furnished with rugs, couches, and lounging chairs.

The evening air at this altitude was cold and ethereally pure. The meadow grass on all sides was starred with blue-eyes and mountain daisies. A pink flush was creeping into the sky; the woods that fringed the surrounding cliffs had already taken on their twilight air of mystery. At their edge, great sugar pines towered two hundred feet into the air, shutting out all but a scant circle of sky from the meadow below. Bright-hued birds called and fluttered among the branches of the

firs, and the mountain-brook that divided the meadow had lost its morning laughter and seemed to be whispering secret things of the approaching night.

Mrs. Onverell stood at the veranda rail and watched the creeping shadows. Her eyes were dreamy, and she twisted the ribbons of her garden hat between her fingers. Hearing a step beside her she half turned her head. It was her husband. He put an arm about her shoulders.

"Rather fine thing in the line of sunsets," he said, his gaze resting with pleasure on the rosy sky and the cliffs, which were taking on opal tints. "Forrest and I made a good catch this afternoon. If we're going to come here often, though, we'll have to stock the stream. It's such a limited space to work, hardly a mile at most."

"And there's really no way of following the stream up beyond the meadow?"

"None that I have found. The water seeps through the cliff in some way at a point about a hundred and fifty feet above the meadow, and then slides down over rock as smooth as ice. We seem to be in a sort of pocket, perhaps hollowed out by the original stream when it was a really imposing torrent."

She crept a little closer to him. "It's such a delightful, lonesome, shivery sort of a place, Jim. It makes me feel as I used as a child, when I told myself ghost stories in the dark. Sometimes I'm

on the verge of being really frightened. That's why I like it so much."

"Here's Forrest now," said Onverell. "Hello, Bob, it's pretty near time to dress for dinner."

"I'm glad to hear that," exclaimed a hearty voice. "I'm as hungry as a fox."

Mrs. Onverell turned to greet the young man who came forward. He was broad-shouldered, and his clean-shaven face wore a genial smile that was worth thousands to him in his social and business relations. It was easy to see why he was known as a good fellow, yet the keenness of his eyes contradicted the rest of his face. Also there were shadows beneath them, and lines about his mouth that told of nervous strain. A man pays somehow for being one of the foremost real estate manipulators in a big city at the age of thirty. It was easy to see that this man had paid in nerve and brain force. His hands were seldom at rest; the muscles of his eyes twitched. When he was not absorbed in the full swing of business, he craved excitement in some other form. Only a desire to please Onverell, whom he was trying to interest in a big hotel project, would have brought him to this quiet, isolated nook. His mind was constantly busy with details, even while he talked and laughed in apparent whole-hearted enjoyment.

Now, catching Mrs. Onverell's regretful glance at the softly flushing sky, he responded to her mood with ready sympathy.

"We can't go in while that sunset lasts," he said. "We'll feed our aesthetic natures and let the mere animal instincts wait."

"Besides," said Mrs. Onverell, "our party isn't complete yet."

"Not complete?" questioned Onverell in surprise, "why, who else—"

"It's a man, Jim, or she would have told you," said a voice behind them. It was a charming voice, with a delicate accent of the south. A tall, graceful girl rose from a porch chair near one of the pillars and advanced toward them. She had gray eyes that could no more keep from giving coquettish glances than a kitten's, and a red mouth all ready to break into smiles or droop like a grieved child's.

"It is somebody she was afraid you'd object to," she continued mischievously, "so she kept it a secret until it was too late for you to do anything."

Mrs. Onverell flushed somewhat guiltily, and they all laughed.

"You are speaking from experience of course, Ethel," said Forrest.

The pretty girl turned her head to look at him from under her long lashes.

"Not at all," she replied. "Men know things from experience. A woman just knows them."

"It's another of Mayme's discoveries, I'll wager," said Onverell.

They laughed again. Mrs. Onverell's fondness for the unusual displayed itself occasionally in what she called "social discoveries." These were people whose odd or romantic qualities had caught her capricious fancy. By virtue of her position as a social leader she insisted upon introducing them widely, sometimes with disastrous results.

"Last June it was the Baba Berendi," went on Ethel. "His hair was long and greasy, and he called up spirits from the vasty deep. The Christmas before it was a young Japanese poet, and he recited odes to her charms in the dead of night. I wonder what it is now."

"Tell us, Mrs. Onverell," coaxed Forrest with his genial laugh.

Mrs. Onverell tilted her chin stubbornly. "Amuse yourselves by guessing," she replied. "It will give you something to talk about."

"What a slander on our conversational powers!" exclaimed the girl. "But I'll forgive you because I've had such a beautiful day. I've been picking all the blue-eyes in the meadow. See." She stretched out her hands to them, full of the delicate blossoms.

She might have been a portrait by Sargent, against the dark background of shadow behind her. Her hair was light and curled softly about her face, her eyes were full of contradictions. Coquetry and conscious power played over the

surface of something deeper, like sunlight over a lake. The changing expressions of her face showed her sensitively strung, like a fine violin.

Jaded men, watching her or speaking to her, often found that she touched something in them back to life; then, as curiously, disappointed their awakened sensibilities. Yet she seemed one on whom a high destiny waited. Robert Forrest thought that he had found it for her when he should make her mistress of a certain house on Nob Hill. He approached her now with an air of possession and her answering smile was quick and warm.

"Tell me who the last guest is to be," she coaxed again.

"You are missing the sunset, dear," said Mrs. Onverell.

"I might better have stayed with the flowers!" she declared. "I hated to stop gathering them. I want to fill every vase in the house."

"Onverell," said Forrest sternly, "tell us, do you know, or do you not know who is this mysterious last guest?"

The spell of the open was at work with them, even in these few hours. Small happenings had attained importance, interest in one's fellows had become no longer a virtue, but a natural impulse.

"So that's why Jose rode off with the two horses this morning?" questioned Ethel. "I suppose he went to the Junction to meet the train. I heard it whistle long ago."

"It is quite time they were here now," said Mrs. Onverell. "Listen and you will hear the rumble the horses make coming through the Jaws of Death."

"What is that?" queried Ethel.

"That's what we call the big hole that Jim blasted out of the cliff, beneath the overhanging boulder. I named it so because it's the only entrance to Paradise. It is far more convenient than a knocker or doorbell, for it gives one at least five minutes warning of visitors."

"What a name! It makes a man shiver," declared Forrest. One could see at times how much his animation was forced, as if he held weariness and strain at arm's length.

"It isn't the name that frightens me," said Ethel, "it's that huge rock poised over one's head with such apparent insecurity. What would happen if it fell?"

Onverell, feeling the demand of the unanswered question, roused himself to a survey of the narrow pass which gave entrance to the meadow. It seemed dark and forbidding; night had already gathered there.

"If you were underneath when it fell, what happened to you afterwards would depend upon your past life," he said. "If you happened to be on the outside, this little Paradise in here would be snatched forever from your longing eyes."

"Is there really no other way to get in?" she questioned.

"I have never found any other."

"Suppose you were on this side when it fell?" she persisted. Her eyes had grown dark with a vague apprehension.

"The birds of the air would come and strew leaves over your bleached bones."

"Do you mean that we couldn't get out?" asked Forrest, incredulously.

"That boulder is merely a fragment of the cliff. Any convulsion big enough to make it fall would probably bring the two sides of the cliff together in a mass of debris. They're only a trail's width apart."

There was half a moment of silence. His description gathered force from the frowning shadows that stole out from the base of the cliff across the meadow.

"Jim, you wretch!" exclaimed Mrs. Onverell.

Forrest's big, hearty laugh broke the momentary tension.

"The old rock has stayed in place for so many centuries that I think we may safely count upon it a little longer," he said.

The sun, about to fall behind the cliffs, poured a flood of purest gold into the cup-like valley where the meadow lay, filling it until it overflowed. At the same time a hollow rumble echoed from the pass.

"There comes the mysterious guest!" exclaimed Onverell.

"Is he young or old?" queried Ethel.

Mrs. Onverell smiled provokingly.

Now the horsemen came into view at the lower end of the meadow. The horses were wet with the sharp pull up grade from the railroad junction fourteen miles away. The man who rode ahead wore a check shirt, a red bandanna, and a broad sombrero. As he drew nearer one could note that there was something odd in his appearance. The lower part of his face seemed to have been crushed in, perhaps by the hoof of a horse. The effect was to give his whole countenance an expression of deepest gloom, and the voice in which he poured out a stream of mild profanity against his weary horse, was mournful in the extreme.

"Where did you get him?" questioned Forrest of Onverell.

"Jose? He's a bit of local color I hired to complete the scenery. George Bisbee recommended him to me as the biggest liar in four counties. Listen to him."

The man's voice floated up to them clearly.

"Git right, old lady," he was saying sorrowfully to the horse. "Don't take sech blamed advantage of your sex. Fine airs can't be put up with in hosses, they're bad enough in wimmin."

"Careful, Jose," called Mr. Onverell. "The ladies are listening."

Jose raised his head and regarded him solemnly. "Taint safe for a man to express his mind anywheres," he lamented. "Whoa, you durn critter."

He dismounted from his horse. The other rider did the same. Those on the veranda leaned forward with lively curiosity as he turned toward the stone steps that formed the approach. They noticed that he moved with a certain freedom and swiftness, like a man accustomed to the woods or plains.

"Who is he, Mayme?" murmured Onverell. "You've got to tell us now."

"His muscles are in training," said Forrest. "He's some kind of an athlete."

The stranger's hat was drawn low over his face, and they had caught no glimpse of it. He was slim and muscular. As he mounted the steps he seemed to be unusually tall, but his shoulders were stooped as if he had carried heavy burdens, either of mind or body. While they watched he reached the veranda and stood uncertain, lifting his hat. The rays of the sun fell across his face.

"Why, it is Charley Strong!" exclaimed Forrest, looking startled.

"Mayme," said Onverell, almost harshly. "You certainly don't expect us to receive him here?"

"I certainly do," said Mrs. Onverell. "He's brilliant and entertaining. Mrs. Stewart Wag-

ner had him to dinner last week, and Mrs. De Lamo gave an evening the week before where he spoke about the Yosemite Indians. I'm not afraid we'll be contaminated."

"Well, I can stand a good deal," muttered Jim, "but—"

Mrs. Onverell stepped forward to greet the new comer, and Forrest looked at Jim with amused eyes.

"She's quite refreshingly daring," he murmured.

"We are glad to see you, Mr. Strong," said Mrs. Onverell, holding out her hand with deliberate friendliness. "I hope you didn't find the trip up to our mountain nest too long and tiresome."

The stranger bent over her hand, and for the first time his features were distinctly visible. He had dark hair, gray already at the temples. His dark eyes wore a strange expression, as if some heavy shadow that had brooded within them was gradually being consumed by a persistent inner fire of hope and courage, as the sun consumes the morning mist. Just now his face had lighted remarkably at the warmth of Mrs. Onverell's greeting, as if it were an unexpected thing.

"It was a fine ride," he declared in a low and rather musical voice, "and leads to so much beauty as to justify a far rougher trip. What do you call this charming place, Mrs. Onverell?"

"Sierra del Nido, the mountain nest. I am glad you find it beautiful. This is my husband; Jim, this is Mr. Strong."

Big Jim shook hands with him rather perfunctorily, and the expression of his face was grave. But Ethel's eyes danced with her enjoyment of a difficult situation. She turned half aside, her unconsciously coquettish glance studied his face.

"Mr. Forrest," said Mrs. Onverell, "have you met Mr. Strong?"

"Yes," said Forrest with his genial smile. He was playing his hostess' lead with a good grace, as usual. "I've met Mr. Strong several times. We crossed the continent in the same Pullman not long ago—"

He stopped, for the man before him was not listening. Neither did he seem to notice Forrest's outstretched hand. His gaze was riveted with a sudden, burning intensity on somebody behind Forrest. His form seemed to stiffen; his hand dropped to his side. Forrest turned involuntarily to discover the object of that intent gaze, and saw, with a start, that Ethel stood at his elbow.

"Mr. Strong," she exclaimed, "how unexpected and how nice!"

The effect was all she meant it should be. The general look of astonishment at her greeting was punctuated by Forrest's rather sharp question.

"Do you know Mr. Strong, Ethel?"

Ethel smiled up into the thin, dark face.

"We had a dramatic introduction," she said. "Scene, the cliff boulevard at Lucerne; time, late afternoon; characters, two run-away horses, and a girl passing rapidly into a state of abject terror; enter a man, appearing suddenly out of nowhere. He stops the horses at the edge of the cliff. I was the girl; the man was Mr. Strong."

She hesitated. The quick ebbing of blood from her face gave evidence that it had been an intense experience. A momentary wonder was born in them all. Had it stopped there or was there more that lay behind her silence? Forrest turned away with a doubt born in his heart.

Mrs. Onverell broke the pause.

"And now it is really time to dress for dinner. Our last guest has arrived, and the bell will ring in half an hour."

"Mercy, I never dressed in half an hour in my life!" exclaimed Ethel in pretty dismay.

"That was a city toilet," murmured Mrs. Onverell in her ear. "There was somebody to dress for there."

Ethel made no reply, but her glance sought the dark face of the stranger. There was a little fear in it and some mischief. She was right; he was watching her, and his grave look studied her until the color dyed her cheeks. He smiled down at her as one smiles at a pretty child.

"Jim," said Mrs. Onverell, laying her hand on her husband's arm, "ask Ikura to show Mr. Strong to the room that was arranged for him."

Both look and touch seemed to ask a half forgiveness, and Big Jim's face softened.

"All right, Mayme," he said, with a return to cheerfulness. "This way, Mr. Strong," and they disappeared within the house.

Twilight had settled over the forest; the shadows were heavy; mysterious sounds were borne on the night wind, and strange scents. Rex, the collie, growled and the hair rose on his back. Ethel stood as if occupied with some absorbing thought. She patted his head with a soothing hand.

"Come, Ethel," said Mrs. Onverell, looking back.

"Mrs. Onverell," said the girl slowly, "who is Mr. Strong? Pardon me for asking, but why should he not come here like other men?"

Mrs. Onverell paused.

"You have never heard anything about him, Ethel?"

"No. Only, after he saved my life that time—I saw something of him—for a few days. I knew then that he was different. But I never knew why. I feel very grateful to him. Is there any reason why one can not know him?"

"Yes and no," said Mrs. Onverell slowly. "You had better let him alone, Ethel."

Ethel looked at her a moment.

"He is my fellow guest in your house, Mrs. Onverell. That is all that I need to know about him. I recall my question."

She moved quickly away and went in at the house door.

Mrs. Onverell, left on the veranda, looked after her.

"I think," she said, half aloud, "that this is one occasion when I would have done well to consult Jim."

Chapter III

DINNER at Sierra del Nido was somewhat of a function, in spite of distance and difficulty of approach. Mrs. Onverell's idea of life in the open included many luxuries. In this way she kept a hold on civilization and gave herself the feeling of choice rather than necessity, which forms much of the charm of the simple life. Silver and cut glass, and two well trained Japanese servants, softened for her the asperities of house-keeping a hundred miles from the centre of supplies.

Neither did Mrs. Onverell always keep her whole-hearted enthusiasm for the open after the falling of night. Then the curtains were drawn against the darkness that lay so heavily over the meadow as to be felt like a presence. Great logs were kindled in every fireplace to drive out the chill, and the hostess and her guests sat down to a table dainty in every appointment.

It was Mrs. Onverell's fancy to have the bungalow lighted only by candles. She had collected a great variety of odd candlesticks and candelabra. The candles on the dining table tonight were all yellow, and their soft glow was caught and reflected from a great bowl of yellow mountain daisies in

the center. The dinner was excellent, the principal dish being the afternoon catch of fish.

This had started Onverell on a series of stories and reminiscences of other big catches and fishy experiences. He was in a genial mood, and seemed determined to banish the slight constraint that had fallen upon the party when they gathered in the big living room before the meal. He told a story well, with a keen appreciation of its humor, and gradually the laughter became general and spontaneous. Strong sat quiet for the most part. From his place beside his hostess he listened or commented just openly enough to escape any suspicion of inattention. He seldom looked up from his plate, and no one seemed to speak to him directly. When he did glance about him, the keenness of his look was almost startling in its swift contrast to his usual impassiveness. In spite of themselves there was not one at the table who did not wonder what might be passing in the mind of this man who sat so quietly. They were aware that nothing in their own experience could give them the key, and his silence became invested with the charm of mystery.

"He can't help dominating every other individuality in the room," thought Ethel. She was angry with him because he had not even seen that she wore a low-neck gown of pale blue, and a collar of brilliants. "Only a strong nature could be really wicked, I suppose," she mused,

studying him with the coquettish side glance of her gray eyes. "Other men play at it and balk the consequences."

Again she glanced at him. He was looking at his plate.

"Don't you agree with me?" she asked, suddenly with a pretty upward inflection.

"You haven't told me with what I am to agree," he replied at once, without raising his eyes.

The restless, feminine impulse within her was baffled, but not quieted. She made another effort.

"This effect of candles—isn't it pretty and odd—"

"And most becoming," he finished for her, still without looking up. Her laugh was one of mingled triumph and exasperation. She leaned forward to look at the twinkling little lights through half closed lids. The something deeper in her eyes came to the surface for a moment and looked out. "I love candles," she said, "they suggest so much more than they reveal."

"They are the poetry of light," answered Strong, quickly. He bent toward her. "They always remind me of the Yucca on the hills of the south," he went on in a low tone that included her only. "The Indians call them 'God's candles.' "

Her face lighted with pleasure at the pretty figure, as he meant it should. Her lips parted, her whole face softened into tender beauty.

"Mr. Strong," said Mrs. Onverell's voice incisively.

Strong raised his head. His hostess was regarding them.

"Are you going to let these two men do all the boasting?" she questioned, lightly. "Their stories are growing exceedingly fishy. Can't you do better? You, who have traveled so much, have you never caught a whale or, perhaps, had a deadly encounter with an octopus?"

Ethel's face changed; the old coquettish, side-glance returned. She clapped her hands together softly. "Tell us the most interesting experience you ever had," she begged.

Strong bowed. His face had become as expressionless as a mask, but his fingers tightened around his wine-glass. The words were a command and he knew them as such. This was the price he was to pay for sitting at dinner in this house, for wearing the dress of the American gentleman. This was the reason he was here beside these women in their delicate gowns, with necks and arms of dazzling whiteness and eyes that glowed like stars. His fatally ready power to entertain, experiences to draw from such as they could only guess, and a point of view daringly original, all these Mrs. Onverell knew and had bargained for. And the price—he raised his eyes to the girl opposite. Her lips were parted a little in anticipation; her eyes seemed once more the

home of dreams. Something that had leaped into his, at Mrs. Onverell's words, died out. He turned in his chair a little, so as to face them all, and began at once, quietly.

"A year ago tonight I was in the city of Los Angeles. The Fiesta was in full swing."

He had a vivid and forceful narrative power. In a moment he had made them see long streets crowded with people in the fantastic costumes of a carnival night. Through the lobby of the hotel, where he stood talking with others, the maskers had run in and out, showering confetti and blowing shrilly upon horns or whistles. The listeners caught, as he spoke, the merry riot of sound and color, the spirit of irresponsible gaiety that only a southern city on carnival night can ever know.

"I grew enthusiastic at last," he said, "and tried to persuade the other men to go out with me among the maskers. But one was tired and the other was bored, and they left me alone, shortly, to do as I liked. As for me, my blood always flows faster when I see the world make merry, and laughter stimulates like wine. I found a place in the balcony of the lobby and watched the gay comedy going on below.

"All at once I heard a sound behind me that was like a sob. I turned. A young lady,—or was it a child?— in a long cloak of pale blue, sat in an arm chair by the rail beside me and looked down also on the scene below. I glanced at her and

thought I must have been mistaken, for her quaint, little face with its big, dark eyes was full of delighted laughter at the antics of a jolly clown.

"So I turned away again, but in a moment the sob was repeated, unmistakably, this time. And sure enough, when I looked the black head was buried in the folds of a scarf; the small form was trembling. At the moment it seemed to me that I saw only a child in trouble, and I crossed over to her.

" 'What could any one do to make you happy?' I asked.

"She raised her head quickly, as if startled. But perhaps my genuine interest reassured her, for she answered me without hesitation, with the prettiest Italian accent that confirmed the impression of her hair and eyes.

" 'Oh, don't you love it all!' she exclaimed, clasping her tiny hands. 'I know you do, for I saw you watching. I would give all my rings and my blue parrot to go out on the beautiful streets among the merry-makers. Think, signor, I have never seen a carnival!'

" 'Why not?' I found myself asking. 'In your country—'

" 'I have been in a convent until a month ago. Now I am dying—oh, but dying to be out there, and they won't let me.'

" 'Who are they?' I questioned, stupidly, again.

"Her face grew so white that I repented of the question, and a look came into her eyes that I had seen too often not to recognize—fear.

" 'They are—they—', she answered. Then she shrugged her shoulders as if dropping off a burden, and looked up into my face with the heavenly innocence of a trusting child.

" 'Signor,' she said, 'it's very nice out there on the street, isn't it?'

"'Indeed it is,' I answered, truthfully.

"She leaned forward and her eyes grew very bright. 'If you should ask me to go there just for a few moments, it would be very rude of me to refuse, wouldn't it?'

"My face must have expressed some dismay, for she hurried on without giving me a chance to reply.

" 'They have gone and left me here to watch. They will be gone, oh, quite some time. They are drinking chianti and smoking black cigars. Oh, they are well amused. But I—I die of longing!'

" 'But—' I said.

" 'I wouldn't go alone, of course,' she went on, not noticing the interruption. 'That would be a sin. I should deserve to be punished. But with you—you are so kind—and you love the carnival. You will take me?'

" 'Yes,' I said, and I assure you I had no thought but that I was giving pleasure to a lonely

child. She slipped her hand into mine, and together we went down the stairs and across the lobby. There were many naval officers at the hotel, from a battleship anchored at the breakwater, and several distinguished foreign guests whose names I had noticed in the register. Some of these wore uniforms also, and the lobby presented a gay picture. She held tightly to my hand as we passed through, and more than one curious glance followed us.

"When the door closed behind us and we stepped out into the street, I felt her tremble again and looked down at her. Her little dark face was glowing with such delight that I felt a pain at my heart to see it. What a starved little soul this must be to find such rapture in mere color and motion! Or, was it the brief sense of freedom? In either case I was glad I had listened to her pleading. I threw myself into the adventure with full zest, meaning to give her an hour of perfect happiness and to return her safely to her big arm chair before the mysterious 'they' should come to claim her.

"So we joined the merry crowd of maskers. I bought her confetti, candy and a bunch of bright colored flowers, which she clasped to her breast ardently, nibbling at the chocolates.

" 'Candy, all my own!' she said, 'and flowers, all mine! They tell me I am rich. How can that be, when I have no money to spend? I never had candy and flowers all mine before.'

"We were carried along by the moving crowd, often swept from our feet by the headlong rush of the maskers, and half stunned by the noise. To see the intensity of her joy was to realize her Italian birthright. We both lost account of time or direction, and were fighting our way through the crowds, breathless with laughter, when suddenly my little companion caught my arm in a convulsive grasp.

" 'There they are!' she exclaimed, stopping short, plainly a prey to overwhelming terror.

" 'Who—where?' I questioned, astonished at the sudden change in her.

" 'There! my husband and the archbishop, in that doorway.'

" 'Your—your husband!'

" 'Yes—in that doorway. Oh, don't let him see me—I—I think he would kill me.'

"She still clung to my arm. My gaze followed hers, and then I saw him—the vicious, low-browed face; the mean, undersized frame. The shadow of his dark look seemed to fall upon the merry maskers who passed him and take the life and color from them. I felt her hands grow cold as ice.

" 'How old are you?' I asked, incredulous.

" 'Fifteen years, signor.'

" 'Fifteen years!' I looked at the sinister face again. The man was talking to some one beside him, tall, sleek, smooth shaven,—the archbishop,

doubtless. Then certain names I had read that afternoon in the hotel register came to my mind. 'Count Pietro Pomponi, Contessa Pomponi and maid.'

"So this was the little Contessa Pomponi. I had been in Rome at the time of their elaborate wedding. Poor, frightened child; this Count Pietro sucked up her enormous wealth like a human octopus, with occasional sops flung to the church.

"I did not know whether he had seen her—with all my soul I hoped not. But his glance was sly and uncertain, slipping from one point to another, and one could not be sure. Only one course was open to us; to make our way back to the hotel without a moment's delay and establish the little Countess safely in her rooms before he returned. But this was more easily conceived than carried out. The crowd that had been our friends, making merry with us, now became cruel, mocking devils to pluck us back from safety. It was impossible to make more than a few steps at a time. The carnival had reached its height; disorder and riot were growing frequent, and the pale little Countess clung to my arm with ever increasing terror.

" 'Quickly! Quickly! signor,' she kept murmuring in my ear, 'please, please hurry.' And still the throng surged between us and our hope of escape, until she faltered and became exhausted.

" 'Rest a moment under this archway,' I urged her, but she shook her head.

" 'Please hurry,' she implored, and we struggled on.

"At last, after what seemed hours of ceaseless effort, when heart and brain were exhausted, we came in sight of the hotel.

" 'Courage!' I called out to her, 'now we are safe.'

"The crowd shifted at the moment, seeking the cause of some new excitement to be heard down the street. I caught her hand and hurried through an open space, crossed a street, half carrying her, pushed her with words of hope and courage up to the side door of the hotel lobby—there stood the husband waiting for us with the archbishop smiling beside him.

"The little figure seemed to shrivel and grow helpless like an old woman's. The big, black eyes wore an expression I shall never forget.

" 'I am afraid!' she cried, 'I am afraid.'

"In doubt what to say or do, I stared at the two standing there silent. On the husband's face there was a look that startled me—it was hate, unmistakable and cruel. While enjoying her wealth, he found the girl-wife only a burden—perhaps a burden to be gotten rid of as soon as convenient. It might even be that I had proved an unconscious factor in bringing about this result. For the sinister little man held out his hand.

" 'Come, Vittoria,' he said in wretched English, that I might understand the words. 'Come, if your evening of pleasure is quite ended.'

"The girl, clinging to my arm, made no move to obey. 'I am afraid,' she whispered, and indeed I was afraid for her.

"He took a step forward. 'What, have you not seen enough of the carnival? Would you spend more hours on the street with a stranger?'

"Then the bland churchman spoke. 'Your place is with your husband, Vittoria. Be glad that he pardons your ignorance and leaves his door still open to you.'

"As I live, the girl did not understand their meaning. She raised her pure eyes to his face, wonderingly, and he had the grace to color under her gaze. But he held out his hand with a commanding gesture, and her reverence for the church and her habit of obedience made her take a step or two toward him. So there she stood, halfway between us, looking back with that expression I cannot forget, as if craving the protection that our free country and kinder laws might have given her. What could be done? The state and the church were arrayed against her; both sanctioned the hideous marriage and gave her helpless into her husband's power. So even while I stood, torn with pity and rage, the husband caught her by the arm and the door closed behind them.

"I quite expected a challenge to await me in the morning, in the old fashion. But when I came down to breakfast I learned that they were already gone. Six months later I read of her death. I have wondered—I have wondered how —she died."

His voice had gathered intensity as he proceeded. At times the faces of the women grew pale, at others he saw tears glisten on their lashes. The men sat absorbed.

"Couldn't you have knocked the head off that little rat of a count?" demanded Onverell, abruptly.

"That would have been a truly satisfying proceeding," said Strong, with a smile. "The temptation was great."

"But couldn't you have done something?"

It was Ethel who spoke. Her eyes were dark with intense feeling. "Americans don't stand by and see such things without trying to do something." The words were both a challenge and an appeal. Her voice trembled as if with incredulity.

"Americans haven't that reputation," he answered slowly.

"But you—"

"There was nothing I could do to help, and much to hinder."

"The Italian Consul, couldn't you have appealed to him?"

Onverell and Forrest looked at each other; Mrs. Onverell studied her plate.

"He would not have believed me," answered Strong.

"Not believe the word of an American gentleman?"

Strong moved quickly, then sat quiet again. The eyes of all were upon him now, they seemed to be holding their breath. His answer came steadily.

"He would have believed the word of an American gentleman."

Amazement looked for a moment from the girl's eyes, then she turned rather pale. Like one who had brushed against an unexpected tragedy, she was startled into silence.

Mrs. Onverell spoke quickly. "Jim, no more stories tonight after that."

"Oh, he's way out of the class of ordinary story tellers," said Onverell, heartily. "Mine would only serve to remind you of the difference."

"It was ripping," declared Forrest, "but I was prepared. I told you I crossed the continent in the Pullman with Strong. We had many such tales in the smoker."

They seemed moved to a sudden sympathy for him. Strong bowed, but his face was once more expressionless, like a mask. He did not look up from his plate.

It was a few moments later that the Japanese waiter leaned over and whispered something into Onverell's ear.

"Excuse me," he said, turning to his wife, "Jose wants me at the stables. There's something wrong with the horses."

"They're not sick, are they?" inquired Forrest. There was a note of uneasiness in his voice. He was thinking of a certain appointment in the city the next afternoon which he meant to keep if it could be done without discourtesy to Mrs. Onverell. Two days were all and more than he could give to this sort of thing.

"Not sick, I think, but unusually restless. They are trying to pull loose from their stalls."

"How strange," commented Mrs. Onverell, "they never were that way before. Do you suppose there's a snake in the stable anywhere, or a mountain lion prowling around?"

"I'll go and see," said Onverell.

"Let me know if you want help," called Forrest after him.

A moment later they heard Jose's voice as the two passed the window.

"Ain't a blame thing wrong that I can see. They won't touch their feed and they're just playin' Sally Water with the sides of their stalls like they was scairt plum silly."

"It's pretty early for rattlers," replied Onverell, "but there might be some kind of animal—"

The voices trailed off, and in the pause that followed those at the table could hear a muffled pounding as of hoofs upon a hard floor. This,

too, died away, and the great silence outside, the silence of night and the forest, crept in upon them. All in a moment the shaded lights, the daintily appointed table, and those sitting about it in the garments of civilization were engulfed, lost in the mystery of the great unpeopled places, which sometimes soothes the troubled soul to peace, and sometimes lays cold fingers upon the heart until it stops for terror of the unknown.

Those at the table were variously affected. Strong's attitude became one of strained attention; he seemed to listen with every nerve. Forrest moved uneasily, and his fingers played with his coffee spoon. Mrs. Onverell abruptly gave the signal to rise, and ordered the coffee brought to the living room where the flames were leaping cheerfully in the great fireplace.

Chapter IV

ALTHOUGH the living room was bright and glowing with firelight, there still seemed to be some sort of electrical tension in the air. The cosy indolence of other evenings at Sierra del Nido was lacking. Forrest walked restlessly about the room for a few moments, touching a book or a bit of bric-a-brac with no realization of what he did, controlled by a nervous impulse to action of some sort. At last he excused himself and went out to see what was happening in the stables. Ethel glanced up at the clock.

"Just think," she said, plaintively, "in the city they are waiting for the curtain to go up on Carmen. Here it seems already late, it has been dark so long."

Mrs. Onverell studied her from the Morris chair before the fire.

"Ethel is falling off in looks," she thought, noting the shadows beneath her eyes. "She ought to stop going out so much." But aloud she said, cheerfully, "The life of the city and the life of the country are two lives."

"That sounds like Kipling," said Ethel. She was sitting beside the table, but her eyes rested

lovingly on the open grand piano in the corner; her fingers tapped the chair arm, as if she were touching the keys.

"You play, do you not?" asked Strong eagerly. Though he only looked at her occasionally, no movement of hers escaped him.

"Play," echoed Mrs. Onverell, "a piano draws her like a magnet. She has no peace of mind until she is seated before it."

"Play, play," said Strong in a low, tense voice. Then as if realizing that his urgency had been without preface, he added, "it would give me such pleasure."

"I only play a little," she returned, slowly, with her sidelong glance, "and that is for my friends."

"Then my pleasure would be all the greater," he answered boldly.

She looked up at him. They were understanding each other without direct words. Both knew that her music would be a revelation of herself, one that she shrank from making to him, one that he was passionately eager to have.

"Then, perhaps, I shall learn your soul, of what sort it is," he said, half aloud.

"I beg your pardon," she murmured, not understanding the words, but he led the way to the piano with an air of authority that she found herself obeying.

"Do you need to see the music?" he asked.

"No, I play from memory?"

"Then I will put out these candles, if you don't mind."

"Not at all—Oh, Mr. Strong, what was that!"

He had extinguished the candelabra that stood on the piano. But as she spoke the room was filled suddenly with a greenish glare in which objects stood out with extraordinary vividness. It did not disappear at once like a lightning flash, but lingered an appreciable time, seeming to gain in intensity. Then it was gone, leaving them staring at each other.

"A thunder storm," said Ethel, with a shiver. "I hate storms in the mountains." But her voice had an upward inflection of doubt and dismay as if she hoped for confirmation of her words.

"It's too early," said Mrs. Onverell doubtfully, "we don't have thunder storms in April."

Strong walked quickly to the door that led out onto the veranda and opened it. He stood looking out for a moment, and again he gave the impression of one who listened with every nerve.

"It's not a thunder storm," he said, at last. "The night is very clear, the stars are brilliant."

"What could it have been?" queried Mrs. Onverell.

"A meteor, perhaps."

The explanation seemed a good one, and they accepted it in default of another. Only Ethel looked at him doubtfully, as they returned to the piano.

"You don't believe it was that?" she said, "I see you don't."

"It may have been."

"What do you think it was?"

"The air is full of some electrical disturbance, yet it does not take the form of clouds and thunder. The horses felt it, we are all feeling it."

"But you are listening, you are expecting something. You have seen something like this before, haven't you?"

"You are quick to observe—or to feel."

"Then it is true. Where did you see it before?"

"Off the coast of Java. It was followed by a tidal wave."

"Oh!"

He leaned toward her to look at her curiously. "Would you really be afraid?"

She moved restlessly. "I don't know. We seem so far away here—so much at the mercy of the elements. The great mountains so close to us—the silences—." She broke off, laughing. "Perhaps my conscience isn't clear." She stopped again, confused. Her glance fell before his.

"It is a pretty fair test of one's conscience to get so close to nature," he answered; "and yet—" his eyes questioned her commandingly. "I'm certain there is something in you that would respond to a grand upheaval of the elements, the terrible beauty of a great tempest. It would not be you who would tremble or cry out."

Her look grew still, even a little awed.

"It may be so," she said. "I hope you are right. But if you are, then you know me better than I know myself."

A tenderness came into his face for a moment. "I am inclined to believe it," he said. "Play to me."

She turned to the piano, the capricious spirit within her overmastered into temporary obedience. She played first a Chopin prelude, then a nocturne. It needed only a few bars to show that music was a passion with her. All at once she was swept far out of herself, as he had guessed. The shallow defense of coquetry with which society had taught her to hide the real soul of her, as a thing to be ashamed of, fell away before the great harmonies she was evoking. At first she was conscious of a strange feeling, as if his spirit stood beside her, questioning, dominating, and her fingers hesitated on the keys. Then she forgot him, while memories, hopes, dreams, past and present, swept over her, as the music laughed or sobbed.

Voices in the room roused her after a while. She became aware that Forrest stood beside her. The sight of his familiar, genial face banished something eerie that lingered vaguely in her mind. She looked up at him, her eyes still full of dreams.

"I'm glad you have come, Bob. I must have wanted you without knowing it."

"You've been playing too long," said Forrest. He had little fondness for music except of the popular variety. "Why are you so in the dark here?" He glanced at the chair where Strong sat, a motionless figure. "Onverell, have you a match?" he called.

Ethel stood up. "Why, I believe I'm tired," she said. Then she drew near him and laid her hand against his coat sleeve. "Must you go home tomorrow, Bob?"

"It looks that way, I've got a big deal on. Half a dozen lots on the Mason tract are to be bid in quietly for taxes. If I can get hold of them it gives me practical control of the tract. Then I have things about where I want them—and you can guess what the next move will be, little girl?"

A beautiful color, creeping into her face, answered him.

A match flared up behind them and Onverell's voice broke in.

"Here's your match, Bob. Mayme says she left her novel on the piano. Light up and find it, will you?"

Forrest held the match to the candles and, raising the candelabra, turned the light full upon the corner where Strong's chair was. There was a movement from the shadows and Strong stood in front of him.

"Sorry to disturb you," Forrest said easily, but the other strode past with a muttered word and went out onto the veranda. His face was white and something burned in his eyes that stirred Forrest to quick anger.

"Damn the fellow!" he muttered. "He has no business here with decent people."

He felt a touch on his arm, and turned to find Ethel regarding him with big, startled eyes.

"Bob," she asked, "why isn't Mr. Strong an American gentleman?"

Forrest hesitated a moment, then an ugly look came into his face, altering him wonderfully.

"Strong killed his superior officer in some kind of disgraceful brawl while he was in service in the Philippines. He was sentenced to twenty years, but got out after five on good behavior."

The girl stood quiet for so long that he turned to look at her. She was very white.

"Five years in prison!" she said, at last. "Where?"

"At Bilidid."

"Five years—then, there must have been extenuating circumstances?"

"The senior officer was rather a brute," admitted Forrest. "Still, the fellow was lucky to escape hanging. He was drumheaded out of the army, and his name has been a by-word in everybody's mouth for years."

"Oh!" said Ethel.

"He has made occasional breaks into society, like this one, but it doesn't go. There are some things even society can't choke down."

"Still he might be a gentleman," said Ethel slowly.

"Ethel!"

"He might!—He might!"

"Like Byron and other fascinating bad men, he finds his strongest champions among the women," said Forrest, with a sneer.

Ethel met his look without flinching, though her color rose. The lightness was gone from her manner.

"Good night," she said, "I am going to my room now. No, it is not necessary for you to light a candle for me. Good night, everybody."

"Ethel, I didn't mean—"

"What should you mean, Bob? Good night."

"Hang it all," muttered Forrest, "I might have remembered that a woman always pities the under dog."

"Of course," said Mrs. Onverell, looking up from her book.

Chapter V

OUT on the veranda Strong was going through an hour of agony, all because of a girl's face where the light of beautiful promise lay. The darkness into which he stared had become the background for a succession of pictures, painted with the cruel vividness of painful memories.

It was a night in the Philippines–black, stifling. The unwholesome heat had racked and tortured men's nerves for days, until they gave way under the strain. No breeze brought relief to those who lay beneath the tents of the invading army. The air was heavy with foul odors.

Two men in uniform walked up a path from the river; their shoes were covered with dust to the ankles, their faces were white with fatigue and pity for the sights they had been witnessing. They had been inspecting the shacks where the men were quartered, down by the river. Sickness had broken out among them. Many were raving with fever and crying out with pain, or dying silently in corners. An epidemic was plainly well begun.

"What are you going to tell the General," questioned one.

"Tell him the truth!" exclaimed the other with the hot, generous indignation of youth. "I'll tell him that the roofs leak; the floors are covered with filth; the whole field where the encampment lies is stagnant and foul, little better than a swamp. It's murder to bring young fellows out here from the States and quarter them this way! We'll lose half the regiment before autumn."

"Tell all that to Ringwood!" said the other, aghast. "You must be anxious for trouble. He'll court-martial you."

"I'll only be sharing the fate of a good many better men," he had retorted. "Since they sent Ringwood here to take command the place has been hell. I've endured seven months of it now. I've seen officers stripped of their shoulder straps for nothing—robbed of their friends and their reputation because he had some grievance against them. I've seen the men die of poor food, bad water, overcrowding. I've pandered, excused, and temporized, like the rest of them. And now we're starting the same rotten business all over again. What right had he to let that new regiment in here? He's incompetent, I tell you; incompetent and a bully."

"For God's sake, hush, Charley!" warned his companion.

Out from among the trees stepped a man, lowering, huge of girth, hairy fisted. His face was purple with heat and much wine, and mottled

with fierce anger. He had overheard the young lieutenant's words, that was evident. For a moment he glared at him, speechless with rage. Then came a torrent of abuse, of threats, of malicious innuendoes, which drew sneering laughter from those creatures of his who accompanied him. The noise and the growing excitement brought other officers from their quarters, and to them the raging general, grown more purple still, repeated the story with gross exaggerations.

Strong felt once more the intolerable, stifling heat of that moment when he stood facing the ring of curious or accusing faces. Goaded beyond endurance, realizing that this man could and would ruin him, he had lifted his voice with the boldness of despair and said over again, word for word, the charges his indignation had drawn from him. Even the bravest held their breath, looking at the general's face, but no one was quite prepared for what came next. For, suddenly, without warning, in the midst of his words, the man leaped at him, purple, foaming, and struck him across the face. What followed was purely instinctive—the start of amazement; the terrible, surging anger that turned everything red before Strong's eyes; the fierce return blow that hit so straight and true; then, the heavy fall, the inert body, the stream of blood issuing from purple lips.

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Great beads stood out on Strong's forehead in spite of the increasing sting of the mountain air, drawn from secret canyons where the snow still lay hidden. A groan broke from his lips. "Blood guiltiness," he said to his soul, and it was the burden of an old and very bitter cry.

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Now as he stood there, staring into the dark, he felt the damp, black walls of the prison close about him, and knew once more the wild terror of the caged thing. Fear of the trap—it is one of the keenest, most primitive instincts. It had torn and harried him into the semblance of a ghost, those first weeks and months of his penance. The pounding of the blood in his veins became the tread of the guard past his door. Once more he heard himself called sharply, not by name, as a man among his fellows, but by number. He was a criminal, a convict. He worked at labor beyond his strength under the eye of the brutal guards. All night he watched, hour by hour, for the coming of light; all day he longed for the night to hide him from the sight and touch of men. Foul words rang in his ears, and strange, animal-like cries. The tread of heavy feet was ever behind him, and the leer or scowl of sodden faces met his eyes. Once more he seemed cut off from every good thing, tainted in soul and body, as the horrible, degrading pictures of those first weeks and months in prison passed before him, and his face grew

drawn and gray. The bitter cry, "unclean," rang in his soul with all the sharpness of his first despair.

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The white starlight fell softly over the cliffs and silvered them to an unearthly radiance. The freshening breeze touched his forehead with gentle fingers. The pictures before his eyes changed, and peace, like a familiar presence, began to steal into his heart. He saw himself bending over the bench in the prison workshop with a growing pleasure in work well done, the first thrill of newborn manhood. He remembered how there had followed a revulsion against his despair; a conviction that the past need never be lived again, nor the present forever clouded by its shadow. The inner forces of his nature, the seed of a good inheritance, nourished by years of discipline and purified by suffering, began to assert themselves. His life was still before him. If twenty years of it must be spent in the loathsome shadow of those gray walls, those years were not too long to learn the patience, the self control, for lack of which he had come there. He had begun all wrong, he was terribly handicapped, but the race was still before him. Hope, like a spring of pure water, began to bubble up within his soul. He began to live his life quietly, persistently apart from his surroundings. He filled his hours with work and study; he shut despair and remorse from his thoughts,

and opened them eagerly to everything good and pure and happy. Like a thirsting man in the desert, he drank in every suggestion of hope, and as if it had been his natural sustenance, he revived; he gathered strength; he came slowly into his own again. He had entered upon his period of punishment an impulsive boy. He came out into the world of free activity a brilliant, resourceful, self-controlled man. Out of the great tragedy and wreck of his life, he had wrested his manhood; built it up carefully, patiently, piece by piece, with purifying agony.

He had come out humble, eager, ready to serve, and the world would have none of him. This was the truth he had been compelled to face in the months and years that followed. A small inherited fortune had made him independent of employment or favor. Otherwise, in the early days of his freedom, he might have starved. The newborn purpose of his life, to undo his wrong to society by whole-hearted service, met with misunderstanding and ridicule. The shadow of the gray prison walls, which he had thought forever behind him, lay over him more heavily out here in the free sunlight. Everybody knew his story; everywhere he was met with coldness or shrinking; or worse, the morbid curiosity with which men regard the monstrous or horrible. It was well for him in these years that he had learned patience, that he had made hope the blessed sus-

tenance of his soul, for he was in more danger than before. During many months his inclination led him to unfrequented spots,—solitary places. It was then that he learned to love and understand the life of forest and plain, the great, wholesome world of out-of-doors. He had wandered extensively, hunting, trapping, avoiding for weeks at a time the haunts of men. Chance had led him among those children of the open, the Indians, and in return for their knowledge of woodcraft he had taught them many things. Among the Piutes, in particular, he was hailed as a friend whose coming was welcomed, whose departure regretted. Here at last he found comfort for a sore heart, and courage to try once more to regain his birthright.

So he had returned to the world of tall buildings and crowded streets, where the wind and tempest of the open were replaced by the passions of men. He began a slow, patient struggle against the ignorance, the prejudice, the cruel egotism of his fellows. It was the charm and brilliancy of his mind, cultivated now by much reading and wide travel, that won him his first foothold. Men found him a delightful companion. They began to seek him out in the hotel lobby or the Pullman smoker. One or two business opportunities came to him, and these, successfully handled, made his name somewhat of a power in backing new enterprises. But socially he had remained

an outcast. Men never asked him to join their clubs, nor invited him to their houses. This barrier seemed impenetrable, he had found no charm as yet to lift it. His standing among Mrs. Onverell's guests he understood perfectly. He was here in the guise of an entertainer, something rather more daring and unusual than other women had ventured upon, something to make her house party a notable affair. The others would admire, but they probably would not imitate. He understood this, yet he had come because of the girl with the light of promise in her face.

Chapter VI

THE vague surmise of those who had seen Strong's meeting with Ethel was correct. There had been a sequel to the adventure on the cliffs at Lucerne. Ethel's mother had been very grateful and not very discreet. Days of companionship had followed each other in dreamlike succession,—rides and walks and excursions on the blue waters of the lovely lake. They knew nothing of Strong but his charm as a companion, and he had drifted for a little while out of the stormy current of bitter experiences into the fairest haven his restless heart had ever known. The soul of this girl had spoken to him through all the baffling contradictions of her nature. She led him by sweet, untrodden ways until the flowers bloomed in the dark and barren places and a passion such as only an intense nature could know was born in him and nourished to full growth. Life became once more a beautiful thing. Every hour was a revelation.

Then one day an American officer, in the uniform of his regiment, came to the hotel. The beautiful Miss Stanton and her mother were not unknown to him, and he made haste to renew the acquaintance. That night, Strong, hideously

awake again, had taken the Overland express for Constantinople to seek in the mysterious east some draught of forgetfulness.

He had never found it.

To the tragedy that clouded his life was added the hopelessly sweet dream of a girl, whose soul lay asleep beneath irridescent butterfly wings. He knew that to him had been given the magic touch to waken it. He could have called to life the woman who looked with such wistful sweetness at moments from her eyes. He could have taught her how to fulfil the high destiny that nature had so plainly marked her for.

The very circumstances of his life had fitted him to see further, to understand better than another. Yet they were separated as widely as the north pole from the south. Any spendthrift foreign duke or adventurer could approach her, and linger beside her, even make his offer for her hand. But for Strong the social barrier could not be crossed. The men regarded his presence in their houses as an effrontery. They would guard their women from him as from a beast of the forest.

So when the house door opened to let Forrest out onto the veranda, Strong stood silent with bent head, like a man convicted. He had no doubt that Forrest had come with a purpose; neither did he doubt what the purpose was, for he felt sure that emotion such as his must have been written in his face. But the strength of all pas-

sions and despairs, met and overcome, is ours to use in other evil moments. And Strong waited quietly. The girl whom he had chosen to love belonged to one of the most carefully guarded of the social castes. Also the way in which she had looked into the eyes of this other man left Strong in no doubt of the relations beween them. The glowing point of light, which was Forrest's cigar, dulled and went out before the words came for which the other waited.

"That you, Strong?"

"Yes."

"I thought I saw you come out."

Strong's hand clenched itself on the railing. The smooth, well modulated voice seemed to call up for a moment a complete picture of the suave, successful man who had spoken. He had a fierce desire to seize him by the throat and choke the inevitable words out of him, that he might go the sooner and leave the solitude and quiet of the night unbroken.

The other's silence disconcerted Forrest a little. He looked about uncertainly and his glance noted the unusual brilliancy of the stars.

"Fine night," he said.

"Yes."

"These mountains are great. I'd be sorry to leave tomorrow if I didn't hope to put through a big deal by going."

"You are going tomorrow?"

"Yes." He laughed with a slight touch of nervousness. He was not finding it wholly easy to say what he intended to a man who would give him no help. "I confess that I am anixous to get there, too. Certain circumstances have combined and the success of this deal is pretty nearly make or break with me."

"Yes?"

He went on more fluently now, taking the plunge. "You see the sweetest girl in the world is waiting for me to build her a home."

"You mean Miss Stanton?"

"Yes." Forrest was at ease now. Strong's tone had been devoid of any trace of feeling. Evidently he meant to take it well. "There's been an understanding between us for a long time. It seems rather maudlin for me to be pouring this out to you," he went on, laughing again. "But I'm going on the principle that all the world loves a lover."

"Of course."

Forrest paused a moment to re-light his cigar. In the silence a coyote barked shrilly from the cliffs.

"Our fathers arranged the match when we were children," he went on again. "It's just a question now of pulling a few things through before I can give her the establishment she ought to have. Then I'm going to stop this infernal rush and settle down to enjoy life." He struck another

match and held it to his cigar with a hand that trembled. "Look at that!" he said in disgust. "A hand that trembles like an old man's before you're thirty-five! Yes, I'm going to stop—when I've made my million." His big laugh rang out again.

"One million will only teach you how to spend others," said Strong with a restless movement that did not escape Forrest's notice. Now that he had said what he wished, he was not anxious to linger. The atmosphere of tragedy was never to Forrest's liking, and although the man beside him was very quiet, Forrest felt sure that he suffered. So with the unconscious swagger of the conquering male he stretched his arms above his head and sauntered toward the house.

"Well, I'm for bed. I hope I've not bored you too much with my affairs."

Strong felt the hot blood pound at his temples.

"Good night," he said briefly.

"B-r-r, the nights are cold at this altitude. Or is it cold? There's something queer about the atmosphere. Do you notice it?"

"There's some electrical disturbance."

"I suppose the cold means little to you. I remember your telling me that you have spent months out of doors among the Indians."

"I have slept out many times above the snow level."

"Well, I must confess I like warmth and comfort. I'll take my strenuous life in a steam-heated office, with a telephone and an office boy."

"Every one to his liking."

And then, at last, the door closed and Strong was alone.

* * * * *

After awhile he was aware of a soft touch on his hand that was like a caress. He started and raised a haggard face. The dog, Rex, stood beside him, wagging his tail in agitated fashion. It was the touch of his tongue that had aroused Strong.

He put his hand on the dog's head. All animals were friendly with him, and the mute caress had brought him a sense of comfort. But Rex was uneasy. He ran from Strong's side to the veranda rail. The hair on his back rose; he uttered a low growl, yet his plumy tail waved as if in greeting.

"What's wrong, boy?" questioned Strong. The dog started toward him, but turned back again with a whine.

Interested in spite of himself, Strong rose from his chair and walked to the rail. Then he leaned over and looked down at the shrubbery beneath. A low call came from out the shadow.

"Is it you, chief?" asked a voice in the Piute language.

"Who is there?" he demanded in the same tongue.

"O chief—"

"Come up here. Show yourself. Who is it that hides in the dark?"

A figure detached itself from the shadows and crept haltingly up the steps.

"You, Annunciata!"

"Chief, forgive."

"You followed me here?"

"O chief—"

"Have I not told you many times?"

"But, chief, there is great need. Do you command me, your foster-mother, to sit by the campfire, idle, while danger threatens?"

The old woman's affection dated from the winter he had spent among the Piutes and a severe illness through which she had nursed him. He had called her, half in jest, his foster-mother. She had taken the name seriously, and her dog-like devotion had become a thing that knew no bounds of place or time. His face softened as he looked down at her.

"Danger? So you said last month at San Jose, and in October when I hunted among the marshes."

"Was it not true each time?"

He was silent a moment; a smile, sad and full of tenderness, crossed his face.

"Yes," he said.

She was crouching on the floor at his feet. Now she raised herself to clasp his knees.

"The chief's life is of much, much worth."

"I wish that those were true words, Annunciata."

"Has not the chief taught my people, and helped them when the winter was bad?"

"And learned from them also. What is it you would tell me?"

She crept closer.

"I am foster-mother of the chief. Shall I not warn him? It came on the wind. There is danger. I feel it here, and here." She placed her hand on her head, then on her breast.

"I do not fear, Annunciata."

"You are not, then, as wise as the birds and the animals. Listen."

They stood in silence for a moment, straining their ears. Then he heard what he had been too absorbed to notice before. The forest was no longer wrapped in mysterious silence, but full of uneasy rustlings. It seemed to him he could hear the pad of soft feet and the breathing of living creatures. From the stable a sharp neigh echoed, and the beating of hoofs against the floor.

"Do you hear?" asked the woman.

"Yes," said Strong. He felt a quick tension of the nerves. Everything seemed to be waiting, uneasily, with dread.

"What is it they expect?" he asked. His nature, accustomed now for years to look beyond accepted standards, was simpler, more impressionable than that of happier men.

"The danger. They feel it. Come with me to my people. Perhaps it will pass us by."

Her hand, catching at his coat, strove to draw him, but he stood still, listening. He saw in fancy a girl's face.

"Come, chief."

He turned to her.

"Go back, Annunciata, to your people. I will be careful. I will remember. There is work I must do here."

"But, chief—"

"Go. The great Father will care for us."

"From Him came the warning."

"From Him will come the escape. Go."

He watched her shuffle unwillingly down the steps and disappear among the heavy shadows. The solemn beauty of his last words had brought him unconsciously a sense of solace. The restless suffering of the earlier hours was past. If there was danger, then there was work to be done, and work brought peace. Also the human, anxious love of the Piute woman had comforted him.

He dropped into one of the deep porch chairs, and his tired body relaxed against the cushions. His thoughts lost their bitterness. He lighted a cigar and began to muse on the girl whose eyes

seemed to look at him through the drifting smoke. He had never dreamed of winning her; he had known that some day she would marry. The renunciation was far easier than if it had come to him earlier. Despair passed gradually into the old sense of loneliness, and that faded into dreamy quiet. The shining of her eyes was confused now with the brilliant light of the stars. Gratefully he felt sleep steal over his brain. Once a brief memory of the Indian woman's warning roused him to momentary watchfulness, then his limbs relaxed, his breathing became regular and deep. With the dog curled at his feet, he slept.

Chapter VII

IT was morning, the morning of the eighteenth of April, the morning of the earthquake. A little group of people stood huddled together in the open meadow and looked at each other with such faces as the dead might have worn. Indeed, they were as the newly dead. The world they looked on in the pale light of this day was separated from the world they had known hitherto by a cycle of unbelievable horror.

Behind them the dust still rose in a cloud from the heap of boards and plaster that had been the bungalow. They had turned their faces away from it, for the ruins were also a sepulchre. From the servants' quarters no one had escaped.

The great earthquake that shook San Francisco to its foundations had attained among the canyons of the Sierras a terrible violence. The silence that heralds the miracle of dawn had been rent by a thousand thunders. There had followed a grinding sound, an upheaval of the solid earth like the surges of a mighty sea. Mingled with the thunder came sharp noises; the breaking and rending of great boulders, the crash and fall of trees. The Sierras had shuddered and trembled with terrible throes. The house had been lifted

from its foundation and hurled in upon itself, a heap of wreckage. The stable was level with the ground.

If the bungalow had been a two-story building, with the sleeping rooms above, no one could have escaped. As it was, the windows opened directly upon the porch or the ground, and the superior resistance of the massive stone pillars and chimneys had saved that part of the house from destruction. Breathless, appalled, doubtful if the life was still in them, they had crawled out through the broken casements. Now they stood there, the five who had made up Mrs. Onverell's house party. The motion of the earth had long since ceased. Confidence, on tip-toe for ready flight, was beginning to return to them. The solid ground beneath their feet seemed once more a thing to trust in. They began to look around, curious over the extent of the damage; they were even elated, suddenly, as people will be over a great experience.

Mrs. Onverell was the first to speak, in a curious, high-pitched voice.

"Are you quite sure about the servants, Jim?"

"Quite, sweetheart. Strong and I crawled through the wreckage and saw."

"Oh—" she cried—"Oh—"

The cry grew to a shriek, she struggled and fought for breath. Ethel, wide-eyed and speechless, had been standing with her arms about her.

The older woman had turned to her involuntarily.

"Water, Jim!" she said, laying the hysterical woman down upon the meadow grass. Onverell and Forrest, a few feet away, had been staring at the ruined house like men hypnotized. Now they turned at Ethel's summons.

"Bring water," she repeated.

Forrest heard her, uncomprehending. His lower jaw was trembling like a child's. The sight of Mrs. Onverell's collapse affected his overwrought nerves profoundly. Onverell threw himself on the ground beside his wife and took her hand in his, calling her name over and over.

It was Strong who heard and answered Ethel's plea. He stooped and caught up a piece of loose bark. Rolling it in his hands into a rude cup he ran to the spring which foamed over the rocks near by. Its force was unchecked by the recent upheaval. Indeed, Strong noted that it was running with far greater freedom than on the previous day, carrying along stones and sand with it, as though some barrier higher up had given way. Already it had overflowed its shallow banks, and was wandering through the meadow grass. He dipped his bark cup into the water and returned to Ethel.

She dashed the water into Mrs. Onverell's face, who caught her breath and moaned. Then Ethel wet her handkerchief and bathed Mrs. Onverell's forehead. Her moaning gradually ceased.

After a few moments Ethel rose to her feet.

"You can take care of her now, Jim," she said. "I think she will be all right. Just rub her hands and forehead."

Strong looked at her anxiously. She was white as marble.

"Feeling all right?" he questioned.

She straightened up and smiled at him with a determined effort.

"Of course I'm all right. A little earthquake that kills off a few people is nothing to a San Franciscan. It takes something worth while to shake my nerves." Then, bending toward him she murmured so that he alone could hear. "Please, I want to deserve a little of what you said last night. Help me."

He answered her with a sudden lighting up of his face. But she swayed as she looked up at him, and he put his arm quickly about her shoulders to steady her, so that when her eyes, which had darkened for a moment, saw clearly again, she was still standing on her feet.

"It was true," he said steadily, "every word was true."

She caught at his arm for a moment, then let it go and smiled again. Strength seemed to come to her from his words and look. She walked over to a knoll and sat down.

"And now," said Strong cheerfully, decisively, "the next thing is to have a fire and something hot to eat."

The comforting, commonplace suggestion acted upon their dazed minds like a tonic. The return to everyday living, the little familiar incidents that make up the customary routine, seemed to take away some of the terrifying impressions of the past few hours and to replace them with sane and normal ideas. Their pale faces, seeming ghostly in the uncertain light of a partially obscured sun, lost their wan look; all were lifted for a little above the sense of an overwhelming disaster.

"We haven't any coffee," said Forrest.

"Nor any provisions," murmured Mrs. Onverell, "unless—" she looked toward the house with a shudder.

"Nor anything to boil water in," added Ethel.

Strong was on his hands and knees collecting twigs, dead leaves, and pieces of bark. She rose at once to help him, and the relief of action brought a faint color to her face.

"Bob," she called, "bring some of those dead branches from the foot of the cliff."

Forrest moved forward slowly, his eyes dull.

"We have no coffee," he repeated.

"Bring the wood anyway."

She could not have said why she had such faith in Strong's ability to provide all that was needful. Perhaps because his manner was that of one who found the situation neither unexpected nor overwhelming. His look had the steadiness of a

man who has met and mastered fortune in many guises and knew resources of patience and invention within himself. Now he had found a large, flat rock with a ledge that jutted out to protect it from the wind, forming a sort of ingle-nook. Hither he carried his leaves and bark.

"Come," he called. "Sit down by this rock. In five minutes we shall have a fire to warm ourselves. In half an hour we shall have breakfast."

He still wore the dress suit of the evening before, for his sleep had been heavy and his awakening had come with the shock that wrecked the house. He drew from his pocket a match holder and kindled the leaves. The fire communicated itself quickly to the twigs, which crackled with a cheerful sound.

"Hurry up with that wood," he called to Forrest.

Onverell started to his feet.

"Come and get warm, Mayme," he said. "I'll go and help Bob, if you don't mind my leaving you." He lifted her in his arms and carried her over to the sheltered ledge. "There were a lot of cushions on the porch," he continued, noting the unevenness of the rocky surface. "I'd better see—" He turned toward the house, but she caught his arm.

"No, Jim," she exclaimed, "no, no."

Her face grew white again. Onverell, looking up, caught a negative sign from Ethel.

"Go and bring the wood," she said. "Mrs. Onverell and I are going to watch Mr. Strong get the breakfast. We are consumed with curiosity about it. Look, Mrs. Onverell, see what he is doing."

Strong had gone over to the southern face of the cliff. Here a landslide of some dimensions had occurred. Rocks, earth and debris were scattered over a considerable area. Underneath one of these rocks his eye had caught a glimpse of blood-stained fur. He lifted the rock and drew out a rabbit, evidently caught in the landslide and hurled to its death. A little deft work by practiced fingers had the rabbit skinned, cleaned, and ready to be cooked. Then he stooped once more and dug out from among the meadow grass certain roots and herbs. These he carried to Mrs. Onverell and Ethel.

"Wash and scrape these," he said, "and keep the fire hot. We'll soon be ready."

A large stone lay just below the surface of the water, hollowed out in the centre by the action of a little cascade which fell over a boulder at this point. Strong discarded his coat and vest and, rolling up his shirt sleeves, tugged and wrenched the rock loose from its bed.

"What is that for?" asked Ethel's voice near him. She knelt on the bank of the brook, washing the herbs and roots.

"That's our kettle," he said, depositing it beside her. "See how the water has hollowed it out like a bowl. And on this side it has a thin, flat projection, the best thing in the world to broil meat on. There's a whole kitchen range ready for our use."

"How did you think of it?" she asked, with an interest in her eyes that he welcomed gladly.

"I've spent months at a time in the woods," he replied, drawing a knife from his pocket and beginning to cut the rabbit meat into small pieces. "Part of the time I was among the Indians, who are masters in the art of using whatever is at their hand. There is always a stone like this when it's needed, or something equally good."

"You love the out-of-doors, don't you?"

He raised his head and looked gravely into her eyes.

"As a man who has known what it was to be confined within stone walls," he said, simply.

Her glance fell before his; a sudden, unaccountable color flooded her cheeks, but she was glad he had spoken. It put their friendship on a firm footing with nothing to conceal or overlook. Then she caught herself up with a start—friendship. Had she indeed gone so far in her thoughts with this man of lost reputation, whom she had seen but twice? Confused, wondering, she attempted no answer, and he went on quietly, noting her look.

"You, too, love the woods and mountains surely, or you would not leave Grand Opera in mid season to come up here?"

"Yes, I love the freedom, the beauty. I would love it very much if something in me wasn't afraid."

"Why should you be afraid among the trees and stars—you, who lie down contentedly every night in the treacherous heart of a great city?"

"It's a relic of the primitive, I suppose, that fear of the spirits that hide in winds and caves."

"It's generally the talk of a bad conscience. See, the rabbit is ready to cook, so is the seasoning. There are joys as well as terrors in the open. This stew is going to be one of them."

He filled the hollow stone with water, placed in the water the meat and herbs, and carried the whole over to the fire. Onverell and Forrest had returned with a generous supply of driftwood, and they built a royal blaze beneath the improvised kettle. Soon the stew was bubbling cheerfully, and they sat about the fire, warming their chilled bodies and making spoons and little cups out of bark under Strong's direction. When the broth was done they filled these and ate with some show of appetite.

The broth had a peculiar, aromatic flavor not unpleasant, and when they had eaten a little it put heart into them. They began to talk, discussing the earthquake and its phenomena. Only

Strong had grown suddenly silent and his gaze rested on the narrow pass that Onverell had blasted out to give entrance to the meadow. His face was quiet, expressionless, but Ethel, glancing at him, got once more, as on the previous night, the impression that every nerve was tense. She wondered, with a sinking of the heart, what was in his mind, and feared to question him.

It was when they were about half way through with their meal and wholly absorbed, that a voice behind them said plaintively. "I reckon that there something that smells so durn good is all et up. It's just my luck to get here in time to wash the dishes."

The men sprang to their feet, and the women turned pale, for to their knowledge they were the only living people in the meadow.

"Jose!" exclaimed Onverell.

"Oh, Jose, are you alive?" gasped Mrs. Onverell, half hysterical again, between dismay and mirth at his appearance, "how you frightened us!"

"We thought—" began Onverell.

"You thought I wuz dead, I bet. You don't know me. Why, this ain't nothin'. Onct when I wuz in the Panhandle we had a blizzard that blew the crust right off the earth and let it loose around in the atmosphere. Yes, ma'am, that wuz a time! Not a thing left above ground far ez you could see."

"But the stables are a heap of ruins," said Onverell, "and the horses and the cow were killed—"

"Well, I reckon I'd a been a heap o' ruins, too, if I'd stayed there. But them there hosses a playin' Sally Water with their hoofs on the floor made me plum nervous. 'If this keeps up,' sez I, to myself, 'I'll take my best clothes and go away.' So pretty soon I went outside and laid down in the grass to think. And the next thing I knew I wuz beginning to feel able to sit up and take nourishment."

"Do you mean that you were unconscious all that time?" demanded Onverell.

"Well, something like that," answered Jose sadly, his habitual gloom unrelieved by so much as a twinkle. "You see one of those mountains fell on me and—"

In spite of anxiety and suffering they burst into a unanimous peal of laughter that drowned his words. He looked at them sorrowfully. "In that case," he remarked, "I might as well eat some soup."

They supplied him with a cup of the stew. Then, while he ate, their talk returned to the subject now uppermost in the minds of all,—how to get back to the city with the least delay and inconvenience.

"The thing to do first," said Onverell, "is to devise some way of carrying the ladies down over the trail. Perhaps we might rig up some sort of

a litter. What do you say, Strong?" Even in the short time since the earthquake had passed it seemed to have become a habit to appeal to this man on every point of moment. But he did not answer now; his gaze was on the narrow pass where they had found their entrance to the meadow, and which must also give them exit.

"That's the idea," answered Forrest, eagerly, in his place. "There are plenty of boards at the house, and the porch awnings would give us canvas. There are four of us to carry it. Let's get to work. The sooner we start away from here the better. We don't want to stay another night."

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Mrs. Onverell and Ethel at once.

"What do you say, Strong?" appealed Onverell again.

Strong rose slowly to his feet and turned on his questioner a glance in which were doubt and hesitation.

"Is there any other way out of here than the one by which we came in yesterday?" he said.

"No," said Onverell, "that's the only one —why?"

He stopped, his gaze followed Strong's. His face grew ashen.

"God!" he said.

"That way looks to be blocked," said Strong. "The boulder has fallen."

There was a general terrified exclamation, then a dismayed silence, broken by Mrs. Onverell's voice, small and high pitched.

"Do you really mean, Jim, that there is no other way out of here?"

"Of course I don't," he declared promptly, gathering himself together with a splendid effort. "I don't know anything about it. There are probably a dozen other ways."

"You're right," said Strong, "and the next thing for us to do is to find one of them!"

Chapter VIII

THE boulder had fallen into the narrow opening, closing it completely. Upon the top of the boulder one of the cliff walls had disintegrated into a mass of rocks, uprooted trees and loose earth, forming what seemed an impassable barrier two hundred and fifty or three hundred feet in height. Above it on every side towered the sheer walls of the cliff, unbroken for a thousand feet or more. They were as completely shut in as miners at the bottom of a collapsed shaft, only with this blessed difference, that the sheer walls of their prison were roofed with the open sky.

The sides of the cliff were formed mostly of loose shale that slipped away from beneath the feet of those who tried to climb, endangering life and limb. Moreover they bulged slightly forward from the perpendicular, making the climber's task practically impossible. All day Strong, Jose, and Onverell had patiently examined these cliffs for any faint suggestion of a trail. At imminent risk of falling, Strong had won a way far enough up over the boulder to discover an appalling fact. The disintegration of the cliff had continued far out beyond the meadow entrance. The loose

sandstone formation showed jagged rents for a hundred feet or more, and the narrow trail that had hung along its face was entirely obliterated. There was no possibility of returning the way they had come. Their only chance of escape lay in scaling the cliff to the forest above.

Now the sun was going down into a strange, gray cloud that rose ever more darkly from the south. Baffled and very weary, they sat by the fire and rested. They did not, as yet, acknowledge defeat. Onverell, in particular, was loud in his declarations that another hour of day would have shown them something worth while.

"As soon as it is light in the morning," he said, "we'll try several of those places again. We'll be fresh, then, and it won't take us any time to find a way out."

Forrest had given out early in the day. His whole being was concentrated on the feverish hope of escape, yet the physical exertion of climbing left him panting and exhausted. Now, at Onverell's words, he raised his head eagerly.

"We'll get out of here early in the morning," he declared.

Strong, starting to replenish the fire, found only a piece or two of their driftwood pile, and turned to the weary group with decision.

"We must get more wood at once for the night," he said. "The fire must not be allowed to go out."

Strong, without question, had taken control of

the situation. He alone was undismayed by the conditions they were facing. Long experience of roughing it in many places had taught him how easily the real needs of human life may be met. Even the labor demanded is healthful and induces the sweetest sleep that man ever knows. The others, long accustomed to luxury and dazed by the repeated shocks of the last twenty-four hours, were lost in uncertainty. Without realizing it they were grateful for the voice of authority, which relieved them of mental effort.

The three men rose at his words and made their way to the base of the cliff, where driftwood lay plentifully scattered, washed down by the winter storms. Jose hitched himself along with many groans, to which the others paid no heed, unless to regret that the accepted creed of their class forbade them to indulge in the same method of relief.

Strong, himself, after a quick look at the women, turned his steps in the direction of the ruined bungalow and stable. In the pantries and storeroom there must have been provisions. Some might have escaped destruction, and the need of them was imperative. In the stable there had been a young Jersey. She had been killed at once by a falling beam. Here was meat for many days. So, in the dusk of this strange, gray evening he came to the heap of fallen timbers and stood contemplating it.

His face was white. Ever since the great central tragedy of his life, the sight of a dead man always brought back to him the moment when the red mist cleared from before his eyes and he had looked on the work of his hands. Although the evening was cold, the drops stood on his forehead as he bent to lift a broken beam.

It took a few minutes of sharp effort to free the beam, whose splintered edges were caught under the debris. When he stood erect again he started, for some one was beside him, some one with tumbled hair and appealing eyes, her long, gray evening cloak showing just a glimpse of the blue silk kimono underneath.

"I'm not a ghost," she said, smiling faintly.

"You shouldn't have come here," he replied, almost sternly.

"Don't be horrid and bear-like. I'm sure there are enough real ones up there among those trees. That's why I didn't want to stay alone. Besides, I couldn't wait any longer to know what you were doing."

"It was your far away ancestor who first tasted the apple," he reminded her, gravely.

"It was, and I am proud to claim her. She was a progressive and courageous individual. As her lineal descendent I am here, in terror of my life, to discover the mystery that lurks behind your actions."

He looked at her with amusement in his eyes.

"I'm hunting for provisions," he answered her at last. "There are probably plenty buried under here, and we need them."

"Anything would do for tonight if we are to get away in the morning," she said, her eyes on his face.

"Think of getting through two mornings without coffee," he replied, readily. "Besides, I'm anxious to show you what a master I am in the art of making it over a camp-fire."

"Mr. Strong—" she interrupted.

He looked at her. Her face was determined, and he knew that neither his words nor manner had deceived her.

"Well?" he replied slowly.

"You don't believe that we are going to get away from here in the morning, do you?"

He hesitated.

"The truth, please," she begged. "Haven't I deserved it?"

"You have," he said, conquered at once.

"Well, then?"

"We certainly have found no way out yet, but we have spent only a few hours."

"Mr. Strong, that isn't fair?"

"You're right," he answered slowly, "and you are brave, braver than any woman I have known."

A little color crept into her face; her eyes glowed softly at his words, but she did not remove her gaze from him.

"Frankly," he went on, "I'm afraid that the formation of the cliffs makes our way out difficult. It would probably be easier for others to get at us from the outside. We may have to wait for that."

"Thank you," she said. "That was what your face told me."

"But that is only my opinion," he added hastily. "Don't give it more weight than it deserves."

"You know. Of us all you are the only one who knows."

"What makes you think so?"

"Because you accepted the situation as a real one, and set yourself to study all the conditions. If there had been a solution you would have found it."

"You don't know what your confidence means to me," he said. "It's the first time—" He stopped abruptly, and the words she would have answered died on her lips.

The gray dusk settled down upon them more heavily.

"To stay here for hours longer, perhaps days!" she exclaimed, all at once, with a shuddering glance toward the ruins. A catch came into her breath, half way between a sob and a laugh. "I'm growing afraid again," she finished appealingly.

He put his hand strongly under her arm and led her a little away from the house, toward the near cliffs.

"You have been so splendid today," he said. "This is only the clamor of tired nerves. Listen, soon you are going to rest. A little way up the brook tall brakes are growing with all the sweetness of the wind and the sun in their leaves. I will gather them and lay them on the grass like a mattress. You shall lie down there and sleep, and the stars will shine upon you all night. Doesn't that sound good?"

"Yes," she murmured, soothed and comforted in spite of herself.

"There shall be nothing worse than stars and silence. We are four thousand feet nearer to heaven than we were down there."

"Is heaven a locality?" she asked, smiling a little.

"If not, we are still immeasurably nearer."

"I like that," she said, "I like it very much." She stopped as if considering his words again. The woman's soul, stirring beneath the butterfly wings, looked out from her eyes with wistful sweetness.

Rex, the collie, who had followed her from the camp-fire, suddenly stood erect and growled. The hair on his back bristled.

"What is it, Rex?" she said, turning to look Then her tense nerves quivered sharply, she caught at Strong's arm. "Oh, what—who is that!" she exclaimed.

Two or three hundred feet away, in the strange, gray twilight, some one or some thing was slipping.

clinging, crawling along like a cat, over a heap of fallen rock at the base of the cliff. While they watched the figure it stopped, hesitated. From beneath its feet a little landslide of stones and sand came rattling away. It stood erect, revealing itself a woman with bent frame and coarse, dark hair that fell about her face. Strong took a step forward, and she raised her voice in a shrill cry.

"It is Annunciata!" he said. "I might have known she would look for me."

"Annunciata?" queried Ethel, still half terrified.

"A Piute Indian woman who once nursed me through a fever, and so feels for me a devotion I never earned. She calls herself my foster-mother." Then he raised his voice. "Annunciata, come here."

The woman approached swiftly, yet with hesitation. It was evident that she feared his rebuke, yet a tremulous eagerness looked from her face. He spoke again.

"You did not go away?"

"Chief, you were here. Forgive, I bring a great message."

"What message?"

"All is gone. Great cities have fallen. San Francisco burns with fire. The world must begin again."

Chapter IX

ANNUNCIATA'S soul knew only two passions, love and fear. Sometimes one was in the ascendant. Then she was sad and brooding, the prey of all the superstitious fancies of her race. Again the other mastered her, and fear retreated before the stronger forces of love and service. Such a mood was upon her when Strong bade her, the night before the catastrophe, to return to her people. She was terribly afraid of the danger which her keener sensibilities told her was impending. She was still more afraid of the lightning of his rebuke, which she had known once or twice and seen administered to others. But her feet, turned unwillingly away from him, faltered and trod with hesitation. One thought was gradually taking possession of her, he was in danger and she was leaving him.

He was in danger! As this conviction came vividly upon her, she halted abruptly, turning in the direction of the house. Then she paused again. He had commanded her to go, and fear counseled obedience. So she stood, hesitating, her simple soul torn in the conflict between its two masters, unable either to go or stay. But

the old Indian woman possessed some of the cunning of her race, and even when her indecision was at its height a way suggested itself to her. She would stay, but he should not know it. She would hide herself among the rocks and trees and watch his goings and comings, herself unseen. So she might be near to protect, or at least to share in his peril. With a thrill of terror, which yet was swallowed up in a greater relief, she turned aside and began to crawl silently, rapidly, like a snake, over rocks and through brush, to the northern wall of the meadow, whose scarred and jagged base would afford her a hiding place and command an outlook.

With an instinct of caution she had instructed one other, the previous day, in the secret of her journey to the meadow. This other was her son —how or by whom was known only to herself. He was a graceless reprobate, following most of the vices of the white race and few of their virtues. He wore their dress and spoke their speech after a manner of his own. A year or two in their schools had taught him to read and write. He was a gambler and a drunkard, but he earned a variable pittance as a guide, and was clever enough to keep out of jail. The old woman could not be said to love him, but she had a sort of pride in his flashy American clothes and a great wonder at his accomplishments. Even his vices savored of a deep knowledge of white men's ways, and she

regarded them with tolerance, if not with complacency. In his turn he gave her a sort of grudging obedience, and plundered her freely of all that she had.

She had instructed him, if no word came from her before twenty-four hours had passed, to seek her out at a certain blasted fir tree on the north cliff of the meadow. This, also, was in sight from her hiding place. So, having disposed herself quite to her liking, she sat down to watch and wait events with the patience of her people.

It was here the great catastrophe of the morning hours found her, still watching, still patient. Amid the grinding of the rocks, the slipping of tons of shale and sandstone, she was tossed about, harried, torn, beaten almost into insensibility by falling debris. Half dead with pain and terror, she had crouched in the shelter of her chosen boulder, clinging to its rough surface like a cat. Her lips uttered inarticulate cries and formless supplications to whatever spirit ruled this hour of disaster. The appalling crash of the ruined bungalow and stables had roused her to a sudden, sharper agony of apprehension. Strong was down there somewhere in that heap of ruins. She must go to him. But when she had struggled to her feet, sick and bruised, her first glance showed her the little party huddled in the open meadow, and foremost among them the figure that her eyes could not mistake.

So he was safe! For some time this fact was enough. She lay quiet, feasting her anxious heart with the sight of him, assuring herself by the way he stood and moved and walked that no harm had come to him. So she rested content, recovering gradually from shock and fear. Joy began to send the blood in livelier measure along her veins. The great danger was past—the unknown terror had come and gone, and they were safe, safe! Soon he would leave the little meadow-valley and she would follow him down to the city. And, perhaps, when the winter approached he would come once more among the Piutes to hunt the big game. Her only care was to watch that she might know when he was ready to go, and follow him, always at a distance, never running the risk of his rebuke.

She had crouched, hour after hour, behind the rock, watching, conscious neither of hunger nor weariness. She had seen them build their fire, and prepare and eat their meal. Then had followed what caused her a slow wonder. Instead of the preparations for departure which she had expected, she saw the men begin a careful examination of the cliffs in every direction.

Soon she discovered that their search would involve her hiding place. She had fled before them like a frightened rabbit, dodging from rock to rock, crawling among the underbrush, escaping their notice only by constant vigilance. And,

as she hid herself anew, she wondered more and more what it might mean.

Noon passed with no cessation of the search. Afternoon drew on, reached its height, and waned toward evening. Still she saw no preparations for departure. Could it be that they meant to linger there over another night? Well, it was all one to her. Only, under cover of darkness, she would creep close enough to hear him speak. It was when the shadow of the weird twilight began to cross the meadow and steal away the color from flowers and grass, that she heard a call from far up the cliff overhead. She raised herself cautiously to look.

On the edge of the north wall of the meadow, near the blasted fir, crouched the figure of her scapegrace son at a perilous angle. He was unmistakably the worse for liquor. A battered black derby rested far back on his head; his tie, of brilliant purple, was disarranged. An old Prince Albert coat that he had obtained somewhere, probably without the owner's knowledge, flapped its tails in the wind that swept down the mountain side from the upper level. He was plainly much excited. As soon as the old woman appeared in answer to his signal, he began to shout unintelligible words to her and to wave his arms in fantastic gestures.

The height of the cliff where he clung prevented her from hearing his words, and she signified the

fact to him, placing her hands on her ears and shaking her head. At this his excitement increased; he shouted more loudly; his arms pointed to the south in gestures that seemed to convey some sinister meaning. She could make nothing of all this, and fear came upon her that he might be seen by the exploring party, and so the secret of her presence there would be betrayed. A few minutes before she had watched them gathered wearily about their camp-fire, as if abandoning their search. But now an anxious glance revealed to her Strong making his way directly toward the bunglow from which the figure on the cliff must be plainly visible. She signalled the excited Indian to go, and retreated into her hiding place. But to her dismay he still lingered. His gestures seemed to urge her to go with him and she shook her head savagely, motioning him away. Still he hesitated, while fear and impatience worked her up into a fury against the graceless scamp. She motioned to him so imperatively that his usual grudging obedience showed itself at last. Still he plainly was not satisfied. On the edge of departure he turned, swaying on uncertain legs. Then he took what seemed to be a piece of paper from his pocket and wrote something on it. This he wrapped about a stone and threw it with fairly good aim in the direction of the boulder where she crouched. At last, while she fairly quivered with apprehension at his delay, he thrust his

derby still further back on his head and trotted unsteadily away through the trees until he was lost to view.

The woman drew a long breath of relief. Reassured by the silence about her, she ventured to look out from behind the rock. Strong had stopped beside the ruined bungalow. He was leaning over and pulling at one of the beams that projected from the fallen building. Absorbed in his work, he apparently had seen nothing. She drew back again and relaxed her strained attitude. All was well.

Soon her thoughts turned to the message that had been thrown down to her over the cliff. It must have been important that he should have taken so much trouble about it. Curiosity overcame caution, and she peered once again around the corner of the rock. Strong was standing erect now. Some one had joined him, a pale-faced girl whose beauty and grace overawed the old woman, even at this distance. He was talking to her. Some instinct told the Indian that he would notice nothing now that went on about him. She crawled out from her hiding place and wormed her way through the underbrush to the point where she had seen the stone strike the ground. A few moments of careful searching, interrupted by anxious glances toward Strong and his companion, showed her what she sought.

It was a torn piece of brown paper upon which he had scrawled a few words in Spanish, the only language she could read.

"San Francisco burns with fire. You can see the light. All other cities lost in great earthquake. The padres say it is, perhaps, the end of all things."

Astounded, shaking with formless terrors, she raised her eyes to the southern sky where his gestures had pointed. The dull, red glow she saw there became all at once the fiery sign of impending doom. Grasping the slip of paper she started to run in the direction of the bungalow. Her terror was swallowed up in the overwhelming need for human companionship and reassurance. She stumbled, she fell, she climbed sometimes on hands and knees, panting with the weight of her appalling news.

It was then that the dog caught sight of her and gave the alarm of her approach.

"San Francisco burns with fire!" she repeated. She flung herself upon the ground beside Strong, clinging to his knees with the shrill, inarticulate cries by which the women of her race voice their grief.

With a quick gesture, Strong raised her to her feet. "What do you say?" he demanded.

"Ai yi," she wailed, rocking her body to and fro, "San Francisco burns, great cities are all swallowed up, the world must begin again."

Her tone and gesture were intensely dramatic and carried conviction.

"Great God!" said Strong, aghast.

"What is it? What does she say?" begged Ethel, terrified at his look.

Her question was echoed from the shadows behind them. The others had heard the woman's cries and were hastening up in alarm. "What's wrong?" demanded Onverell.

Strong translated her words, too stunned to soften any of their meaning. Those who heard him stared at each other, speechless and stricken.

"Ai yi," said Annunciata again, roused to rude eloquence by the wonder of her news. "San Francisco burns with fire. There you see the light of it."

She pointed to the south, and their gaze, following her gesture, saw the dull, sinister glow across the sky.

"It is the day of wrath," continued the old woman in a sort of weird chant. "The padres say it is sent for the sins of the people."

"What does she say?" half whispered Mrs. Onverell.

"The priests have told her the world is suffering for the sins of the people," translated Strong, mechanically.

In the growing darkness of that awful night the thing seemed altogether possible. They stood silent among the shadows, and felt the life that

they had known slip away from them, as it seemed, forever. All the props and patch-work of civilization seemed to fall with a crash that was the grinding of rocks, the roar of trembling earth strata. They were face to face with the naked, primitive facts of existence. It was overpowering. The old Scriptural pictures of wrath and judgment seemed all at once vital with a present meaning. Nor was there any one of them who doubted that the judgment was righteous. Suddenly Strong turned to the woman.

"How did you learn this?" he questioned in English. "You have not been out of the meadow?"

"No chief, forgive," she answered, slowly.

"Who, then, told you?"

"Enrico, he tell," she muttered, groping with the difficulties of the strange language.

"Where is he?"

She pointed upward to the blasted fir tree.

"There."

"Henry there, on that cliff!"

Excitement tingled through his words, and the others, dazed though they were, caught the thrill of it.

"He could bring help!" exclaimed Onverell.

"He could carry a message," said Forrest.

"Help from outside," murmured Ethel. "You said perhaps that was the only way."

They crowded close about the woman with growing eagerness. Strong laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Listen, Annunciata," he said. "We are shut in here by the fallen rocks. We can find no way out. Where is Henry? We will send him for help."

"He go," answered Annunciata, looking up rather bewildered into their faces.

"Gone!" echoed Strong.

"Gone!" exclaimed Onverell. "Why didn't you keep him! Why didn't you hold onto him?"

"Him very much drunk," said Annunciata, complacently.

"Lord!" groaned Jose, whether in envy or despair it was difficult to tell.

"So you've lost us our one chance, curse you!" exclaimed Forrest in uncontrollable agitation. If the woman had been near him he would have struck her.

Strong put an arm about her shoulder. "It is hard to read an Indian's mind," he said gently. "Annunciata understands only one thing well—to love."

The old woman comprehended their meaning slowly. She held out the piece of torn paper to Strong with a gutteral ejaculation.

"Ai yi," she said, rocking her body. "Out there all gone. Why not good to stay here?"

The words checked their excitement. Again they stared at each other, speechless.

"Do you suppose," began Onverell. He stopped and moistened his dry lips. "Can the woman be telling the truth?"

He was looking at Strong, and after a moment Strong answered him.

"Why not?"

"But whole cities wiped out?"

"Such things have been."

"But whole cities—" persisted Onverell, as if reiteration of the words might make them easier of belief.

"If there had been a city here last night," said Strong, "would it be standing now?"

"No, no!" sobbed Mrs. Onverell suddenly, burying her face on Jim's shoulder.

Once more they felt in fancy the sickening sway of the earth beneath them.

"San Francisco gone!" murmured Ethel.

"All gone." The old woman took up the burden of her tale again,—"Oak-land, Ber-ke-ley, all gone."

"Lord!" said Jose, again. All other words seemed stricken from his vocabulary.

"I have not heard the whistle of a train all day," admitted Onverell. "The Union Pacific passes not far from here. Then there is the local track we came by."

"All gone," repeated Annunciata, rocking her body. "Ai yi, the world must begin again."

"With fire!" repeated Ethel. "Why, it's our homes that are burning; all our friends are there." She looked around as an animal looks at the walls of its trap.

"They will get away," said Strong. "Fire is not hard to escape. Better fire than pestilence and famine."

"What is to save us from pestilence and famine," demanded Forrest suddenly, "unless we get away from here?"

Strong turned to him quickly. "Because we shall do something to prevent it," he said. "There is always something to be done. Just now we're all going to gather pine boughs and brakes for our beds. Rest is our greatest need, and the night brings counsel, as the Indians say."

"I shall never sleep again," moaned Mrs. Onverell, but Onverell, with the wisdom of love, took her in his arms.

"Come and help me, Mayme," he said. "I am as tired as a dog, and that fern bed sounds to me like a downy couch of Paradise."

Strong moved over to where Ethel stood, staring at the red glow in the southern sky. His, too, was the intuition of love.

"Miss Stanton," he said, "might I put Annunciata in your care? She has had a hard experience and I suspect she needs food. Will you make her comfortable?"

Ethel turned at once, some of the strained look left her face.

"Of course," she said quickly, "thank you for asking me."

"Her welfare is dear to me," he said simply.

He stood aside to let them pass. His words, his manner, left her happily confused, as one who has received a delicate tribute. She wondered at the swift light which had come into his face in the last few moments, making him seem to lose ten years of age and suffering.

"He must have looked like that before the night of the quarrel," she thought.

Strong, as she passed him, was conscious of her sweet feminine personality as if he had inhaled the perfume of an exquisite flower. The whole universe seemed throbbing about him to a mighty, soul-thrilling music. For Annunciata's words had suddenly taken on to him their complete meaning. "The world must begin again." The old world that had tried and condemned him; the world that had held him a social outcast and denied him everything but the privilege of work without its rewards; this world was swept away in a sea of flame or buried in yawning chasms of the earthquake's making. In the new world that must begin with primitive facts, with the mere struggle for existence, what would any man's past count? It was a clean slate. The very qualities that he had wrested out of that past, the patience,

the endurance, the mastery of circumstances, would make him a leader in this new world about to begin. What a God-given resurrection! He felt a burden of shame and sorrow, that seemed a tangible thing, roll away from him. He stood up straight and free, he lifted his face to the stars and laughed.

"Strong," said Onverell's agitated voice beside him, "Strong, don't you hear me?"

"Well?" questioned Strong, dimly conscious of him through the thoughts that thronged his brain.

"Don't you see how the water's rising in the brook here? It's overflowed both banks since morning. All these meadows were lakes once. Suppose the outlet of the water has been cut off by the settling of earth strata! We're caught like rats in a trap!"

"There is no fear," answered Strong, his face raised to the stars.

"But, man—"

"I tell you there is no fear. We have not been saved, we few out of millions, perhaps, to drown like rats. We shall live—live to make a new world!"

He laughed again, as he had not laughed in ten years, and strode off through the darkness, leaving Onverell to stare after him in dull wonder.

Chapter X

WITHIN the next three weeks the little mountain meadow began to take on the full beauty and luxuriance of early summer. The chill of the snow, piled deeply in hidden canyons, was gone much sooner here than in the higher altitudes where the larger meadows and basins might as yet be showing only a faint touch of green.

Here the banks of the widening stream were already starred with white violets and purple grasses. Everywhere along the rocky crevices were ferns and wall flowers, with delicate maidenhair hiding in grottoes. Sedges, matted willows and trembling aspens leaned over the water. The shadowy belt of two-leaved pine that fringed the open grassy space, with its outer rim of majestic silver firs, had become the home of innumerable birds which fluttered in and out among their branches all day, with the delicate music of the mating season. The meadow was like an emerald lake, stirred by the wind into a rippling foam of many-hued flowers. Everywhere it was securely hemmed in by majestic granite walls, sculptured into domes and battlements of a silvery radiance.

Plainly, some glacier of an early period had eroded out the little basin, leaving it unapproachable to any but winged creatures, as if nature had hidden there secrets to be discovered only by chosen ones, who should not be afraid of the dragons who guarded the treasure.

Three weeks and a day or two more the little party had been shut into this gem-like basin; neither had any one as yet devised any means of escape. This enforced stay among beautiful solitudes, with all the attendant conditions, had wrought upon them with great differences, according to the soul of each.

To some nature had already breathed syllables of her secret things, so that to them the meadow was no longer a prison, but a garden of dreams, an outer court of the undiscovered country. Such a one was Ethel. To her, in spite of shock and inevitable sorrow, every day of the new life was a revelation. She had come to the house-party worn with late hours and excitement, with an unconfessed sickness of the heart that her life seemed to yield her so small a measure of content. Weeks of pure air, long nights of refreshing sleep, following days of unaccustomed exercise, simple and scanty food, had transformed her. The shadows beneath her eyes had disappeared; a soft color had crept into her cheeks. More than this, under the stress of strange and deep experiences, her nature seemed to have cast off

much that was alien to it. Her butterfly wings of coquetry were laid aside, and the woman behind them looked at a new world with eyes of wonder. Already the old life had begun to seem dream-like and unreal, as the crowded ways of the city do seem when one gets outside the circle of its influence. The men had been brought face to face with its problems of mere existence and self-preservation. Forced back to the primitive and fundamental, dazed by the clamor of elemental appetites, the cry of their bodies for food and warmth, Onverell and Forrest—the capitalist with his useless million, and the brilliant promoter whose million was almost made—found themselves utterly at a loss in the new environment. Dismayed, ineffective, at the mercy of constantly changing impulses, they were forced to turn to the man who seemed so astonishingly fitted to meet and control the changed conditions.

Strong had made no mistake in foretelling his place in the new order of things. He was the acknowledged leader. It was under his direction that all necessary labor had been accomplished in these three weeks. The wreckage of the house and stables had been his first concern. In rude coffins, knocked together from planks with stones for hammers, the dead had been buried. Other planks, a blanket or two, and some recovered rugs had been utilized to make a little shelter for Mrs. Onverell and Ethel, for neither would

consent to return to the bungalow, a part of which might have been made habitable. An Indian serape hung at the door; a rude window, cut into one of the sides, was protected by a curtain. Within this shack were two fern-beds, some chairs, bureaus and tables, saved from the wreckage. Annunciata slept on a blanket at the threshold.

The men accomodated themselves outside by the camp-fire, which they took turns in replenishing. It was never allowed to go out. For strange visitors stole down sometimes out of the neighboring mountains, and fiery eyes gleamed from among the brush after the shadows fell and the scent of the evening cooking had drifted far on the air.

A few recovered kitchen utensils, part of a barrel of flour, as much of sugar, and the carcass of Onverell's blooded Jersey cow had simplified somewhat the problem of food. Traps, of Strong's manufacture, had contributed rabbits, quail and wood doves to their scanty menu.

The heavy timbers and beams of the bungalow had been utilized to construct a temporary barrier for the waters of the brook, which ran with increased violence. Every day it wore its bed deeper and overflowed the meadow for a more considerable area. That there was a menace in the continued increase of its flow they all recognized, but the timber had so far confined the water successfully, and other problems were more pressing.

Chief of these problems was the necessity for clothing. The light silk dressing gowns, in which Ethel and Mrs. Onverell had made their escape from the house, were entirely inadequate and gave rise to real suffering. It was Strong again who had come to the rescue. The skin of the little Jersey, tanned after a fashion by sun and water, he utilized for moccasins. Annunciata had sewed them with thorns and strips of leather. Onverell had found a broadcloth suit of his wife's, more or less damaged, and a corduroy skirt for Ethel, and Strong, with Annunciata's help, had made for her a little jacket of the leather and trimmed it with fringe. Its construction had been a source of much interest and many anxious consultations. Her delight over it on its completion exceeded any past joy over Paris gown or carefully tailored suit. Strong had promised her that its christening should be in every way appropriate, and they decided upon a fishing excursion for breakfast trout, to be undertaken on the first favorable morning.

His call outside her window at daybreak a few days later brought her, ready and eager, to the door of the shack. Her feet were clad in the moccasins, her brown corduroy skirt came to her ankles, and over a full, white waist she wore the leather jacket. Her soft brown hair, which was full of golden lights, she had braided in two braids and drawn forward over her shoulders. A bright-

hued feather that Jose had brought her the day before was fastened behind her ear.

"How do I look?" she asked, stepping out from the door of the shack into the ineffable pink radiance of the new born day. "How beautiful!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands with an unconscious gesture. "See, our valley seems to be the centre from which that lovely light radiates. It is the dawn meadow!"

"The dawn meadow!" he repeated. "It is that, indeed."

She raised her eyes to him, full of happy laughter, and he met her look with the freedom that had been his in every act since the night when the old world went out in flame and earthquake shock.

"How do I look?" she demanded.

His eyes rather than his lips answered her. "Come," he said, "it is a morning of Paradise. Annunciata has gone ahead to find where the fish are hiding. Let me help you over these rocks."

A line of rocks had been laid across the meadow grass, over which the swollen waters of the brook were creeping. He held out his hand to help her, but she sprang past him as lightly as a bird and laughed back at him from the rocks ahead.

"I have wings this morning," she said. "I don't think I was ever out so early before. Perhaps I might always feel my wings before the sun is up. They are fairy-like things, all gossamer

and cobweb lace, that vanish in the prosaic heat of day. Did you ever notice what an enemy the broad light of day is to fancies made of gossamer?"

"I've noticed it," he said smiling, "and fancies are beautiful things, truer, perhaps, than the glare of the day. You wouldn't make a good sun-worshipper."

"No, I love the dawn and the twilight and the night. They are full of promise. They don't give all they have."

They were walking now along the path on the further side of the brook. Tall aspens overhung the water, brakes as high as their arm-pits grew in the marshy soil. The day, not fully risen, was here little more than a soft gloom, with delicate mists rising from the hollows. Strange, wild scents were still in the air. Subdued rustlings were heard amid the brakes, or further away where the tangled undergrowth was thick. Rex, the collie, trotting along by them, stopped often to raise his head and sniff the air with agitation. During these weeks, the dog had been left to himself, he had hunted his own food and made his bed among the grasses. The effect upon him had been curious. His honest brown eyes had developed a crafty, watchful expression. His body had grown lean and muscular. Strange instincts often seemed to stir within him, expressing themselves in long drawn howls from a muzzle lifted to the night sky, or sudden, darting rushes of incredible

swiftness after something among the shadows, accompanied by a great excitement, gleaming eyes and frothing tongue.

Such an impulse seized him now, scenting the wild odors on the morning breeze. He stood rigidly at attention, seeming to quiver from head to tail-tip. Then he darted away like an arrow from the bow, with great leaps that carried him over rocks and brush, on and up and out of sight, the full length of the meadow. Then, while they watched, he appeared again out of the mists, running grandly, sweeping by them like a cavalry charge, head forward, chest low to the ground, eyes glaring straight ahead.

It was magnificent, thrilling. They forgot themselves in watching it. Only Ethel's hand clutched at Strong's coat sleeve, as if her enjoyment was vaguely tinged with fear.

"That dog is reverting," said Strong with interest. "Those are things his ancestors used to do when they were meat-hunting, predatory creatures. He couldn't tell you why he knows it, but he does. Don't you, boy?"

The dog, who had just crashed out of the bushes to the left, stopped suddenly and fell into step beside them with a wag of the tail.

"It was glorious!" said Ethel.

This morning she was a radiant being, and care seemed to have dropped from her. Involuntary trills of song, like shy bird-notes, escaped her lips

as they went along; Strong held his breath to listen. That they should be walking here together this way was one of the proofs that God was in his Heaven.

As they made their way along the path he stooped to examine a lace work pattern of little tracks in the dust. Then he raised his head with a grunt of satisfaction.

"What are they?" questioned Ethel.

"Quail," said Strong.

"How do you know?"

"By the shape and size."

Sure enough Rex's inquiring nose stirred up a sharp whir of wings from the brush near by.

"A mother-bird," he said softly, and Ethel called quickly to the dog.

"Come here, Rex, don't frighten the darling."

The sun was now rising and a break in the trees gave them a tangled bit of brush to cross.

"Step carefully," said Strong. "There's been a snake by here. Look out on the left."

"How do you know?" questioned Ethel.

He pointed to a sinuous line that cut the path at right angles. He drew his knife from his pocket.

"Why is he on the left?" she asked timidly. "Are you sure?"

"Do you see that break in his trail? Something startled him, perhaps our coming. He swerved from the path a little. See the narrower

mark where his tail passed? It points to the right."

"Are you going to kill him?" asked Ethel, her eyes fearful.

"I must for our protection. We can't leave snakes here to breed. They are unpleasant neighbors. Stay here a moment."

She waited in the path, her whole form rigid with the woman's instinctive dread of crawling things. A sudden, whirring rattle came from the brush and she shut her eyes tight.

A moment or two later a laugh sounded beside her, and she opened them again to see Strong washing his knife in the water of the brook.

"I'm reverting, too," said Ethel shamelessly. "That's the stirring of forgotten instincts. One of my remote progenitors was an ostrich who lived in the desert. I think I did remarkably well not to scream."

"You did," he assented gravely. "As a reward you shall have this for a belt, if you will carry it back to camp."

He held out a long skin with a formidable bunch of rattles at the end. Ethel shrank back.

"Very well," he said in broad amusement, and started to put it into his pocket. Her eyes grew covetous.

"Can't I have it unless I carry it?"

"No, there are always conditions. Haven't you learned that?"

Her look became suddenly determined. "I will have the belt. It's a beauty. Here, give it to me quickly before I repent."

She held out her hand and he placed the skin across it. At the slimy touch her face grew white and she gasped, though she held on to it bravely and walked ahead.

But the little trill of her song had died away, and in a few moments he relented. He reached over and drew the skin through her leather belt so that it hung securely just out of the way.

"That's better," he said, and she smiled at him with a relief and gratitude that he found absurdly touching.

"Where do we fish?" she asked, as they still continued side by side along the narrow path which was now little more than a suggestion, among ferns and grasses.

"Wherever we find Annunciata. She will know the right place."

"How will she know?"

He looked at her whimsically, and she laughed.

"My childhood isn't so far away that you need to look at me like that. Besides, these aren't the questions of mere unthinking ignorance. I'm using the Socratic method."

"Pardon me, I should have known."

"You see," she went on with sudden earnestness, "in a new environment it's those who adjust themselves that prove fit to survive, isn't it? I've

read that somewhere. That's what I'm trying to do."

"Then I'll answer all your questions cheerfully," he said with an attempt to win back her happy mood. But she had grown grave; her eyes were wistful.

"Mr. Strong, do you think anyone has been trying to find us from outside there?"

"Who can tell?"

"If they have," she went on, studying his face, "they ought to have communicated with us by this time. Three weeks."

"Who can tell that?" he repeated, but his eyes answered her better.

"Then—if we are to stay here the only way to live happily, successfully, is to adjust ourselves to everything, isn't it?"

He knew of what she was thinking and the cause for the shadow that had fallen across her eyes. While his lips answered her, he was busy with thoughts of Forrest and the ideas her words had called up. For Forrest was the one of them all who rebelled day and night, with all his being, against this thing that had befallen them. He lived from hour to hour in the hope of rescue or escape, and raged against the fate that kept them prisoners. Forrest had been a pre-eminently successful man under the old conditions. He understood and filled all the demands of business and social success. All that was his life; the

excitement of big deals, the thrill of the venturesome moment, the flattery of men and women. He had not known that it meant so much to him, that he would be lost and adrift away from it. And now he was placed where his special kind of brilliancy was worse than useless, and he was not showing to advantage.

It takes some largeness of nature to find joy or even contentment in the primitive. These three weeks had been a test of great severity. The little pleasure party had been face to face with conditions under which men often relapse into the beast. Exhausting labor, scanty food, secured by force or cunning, intense solitude and self communion—all these, to one who accepts them with a good will, make for health, both physical and mental, and fitness and the power to survive. But the heart that cherishes hot resentment against its fate grows quickly embittered, purposeless, often cruel.

So with Forrest. His cheery laugh was no more heard. He had grown sullen. The only topic that roused him to animation was the possible chance of escape. Often he refused to eat and brooded silently by the fire far into the night. As far as possible he avoided all labor, and Strong suspected that he felt a physical weakness of which he was ashamed.

To Ethel, Forrest spoke seldom, and mostly to utter vague outbursts of regret that they had ever

come there and vaguer promises to take her away before long. Sometimes he avoided her altogether, as if unable or unwilling to show her the protecting tenderness she had the right to expect from him. The shadow of this was what Strong read in her face.

Their momentary absorption was broken by Jose's mournful tones which sounded suddenly beside them.

"That's a fine snake skin you got, ma'am."

Jose was one of those to whom the enforced stay in the meadow was no hardship. His frame, toughened by long exposure, found the labor required of him easy, the food sufficient. For amusement he addressed himself to Annunciata, who had conceived a violent dislike for him, and whose temper, uncertain with age, made her companionship full of excitement. It was evident that he had just come from a passage at arms with her, for there was a twinkle of joy in his eye which contradicted the habitual solemnity of the lower part of his face.

"'Tain't every one can hev company on his mornin' walks," he remarked in a tone of self-pity.

"Why, Jose, are you lonely?" inquired Strong, suspecting that something lay back of the twinkle. "You'd better come along with us. Annunciata's up the stream a way."

His look grew scornful.

"Lonesome! Huh, not so's you'd notice it. There's times when a man'd ruther be lonesome. I've spent whole winters on the plains and never see'd a lady person. Besides I seen the Injin a waitin' fer yer up there, and—" The twinkle deepened, but he glanced at Ethel and stopped.

"Go on, Jose, don't mind me," she begged.

"Waal," he said, slowly, "it ain't very pleasant to be told to go to hell, 'specially by a lady."

"Jose, you're a shameless wretch," said Strong, "go home and build up a fire for our fish."

He disappeared down the path with what, in another, would have been a chuckle.

A few rods further up the stream they found Annunciata by a little pool formed from the overflow of the main stream. Here she had managed to imprison eight or ten trout by a dam of stones and twigs. At their approach she held her fingers to her lips and pointed to the pool where occasional gleams of silver flashed. A light mist had drifted in among the cliffs, the edge of some fog blanket over the ocean below. Annunciata's figure, as she stood half hidden with finger on lips, became suddenly mysterious, like that of some prophetess of old.

"I catch," she muttered. "They come to me this day, not you."

Out of deference to the others Strong had commanded her to speak English. After three weeks of effort her words came more easily, her accent was less difficult to understand.

"As you will," he answered her. Obeying his whispered direction, Ethel established herself behind the shrubbery on the bank, and he took his place beside her. The old woman crawled slowly, carefully to the edge of the pool. She thrust her naked arm little by little into the water, until it was buried to the elbow. Then she let it hang motionless. A moment passed, two moments, and not a quiver stirred the woman's body. Then suddenly her fingers shot out and closed like a vise about something that struggled. A big trout flung himself out of the water in a mighty leap, and lay quivering on the grass.

"Oh!" breathed Ethel, her eyes shining with excitement.

Half a dozen big trout were captured in the same way, and then Annunciata rested while Strong cleaned the fish and prepared them for broiling. The gray mist swept about them in long, fantastic spirals, blotting out the newly risen sun. Ethel watched Strong at his work with a vague, uneasy sense of having done all this before, long ago. It was only a formless suggestion, yet an eerie feeling took possession of her.

"You have faith in Annunciata's impulses, haven't you?" she asked of Strong.

"Yes, she is an old woman and an Indian. She sees things that I can't see."

"What sort of things? Do you really believe that she sees things?"

"Yes."

Ethel looked at the old woman, who now squatted comfortably on her heels, rocking her body back and forth.

"What sort of things?" she repeated in a low voice.

"Ask her."

Ethel considered the stooped, swaying figure a moment. Then she went over and sat down beside her.

"Annunciata," she said, "what do you see?"

The old woman turned her head with a sort of grunt, and studied the fresh young face. Perhaps she found in it something imaginative, credulous, something akin to the primal spirit that looked from her own eyes, glowing strangely in her wrinkled face. She grunted again.

"Look," she said, and raised a crooked finger, pointing into the mist.

Ethel looked, half closing her eyes in imitation of the other. The giant firs towered above her, their tops lost among the mist spirals which the breeze was driving hither and thither. It is an uplifting thing to sit in the shadow of great trees. One seems then to understand things that are withheld from closed rooms and crowded streets. Ethel, through her half-shut eyes, saw the wind-driven mist assume strange, vast shapes that bent and swayed toward her and lifted flowing robes in solemn gestures. And the murmur in the air

might have been only the rustle of fir boughs, or whispered messages of warning and command. So the ancient Druids learned to worship. Ethel was thrilled with a sudden overpowering sense of mystery. Great presences seemed indeed to be all about her. She lifted her eyes to Strong and he smiled at the awe in their depths.

"Can't you see how it is," he said, "that the primitive people express themselves in poetry? The prophets, too, have lived in deserts and solitary places."

At this moment the sun broke triumphantly through the mist once more, and the freshening breeze drove the last clinging spirals to flight. The face of the world was changed. The aspen boughs danced and gleamed and glowed with a million diamond drops. Once more bright-hued birds fluttered and sang in the sunlight; the mysterious presences were gone.

Ethel jumped to her feet. "In a moment more I might have been talking poetry myself. And Annunciata was about to break out into a prophetic frenzy." She laughed up at him. "Do you know I am learning all sorts of things I never knew before—big, out-of-door things, that I'm always going to be glad to remember."

A quick light flashed into his face. He drew his sinewy body to its full height.

"This is my world!" he said; "I understand it, it understands me. But that you, too, should

learn to understand so readily—tell me, could you learn to be happy if you stayed always in the open like this—if there should be no city to go back to, no conditions different from these here? That is what we may find when we get out."

The girl drew a quick breath, and her eyes drooped as if she looked into her heart.

"I—I think I could be happy."

"Not just for a little, while it was novel," he persisted, studying her face with eyes that demanded the truth, for her answer held the measure of much that the new world had for him. "Could you learn to forget the other life—to think of it without regret?"

He was bending close to her, studying the changing expressions of her face.

"Ethel," said a voice beside them. Their absorption had been complete, and a measure of confusion fell upon them as they looked up and saw Forrest standing in the path. They had not heard his footsteps, nor the dog's whine of greeting. Forrest's face was dark, he looked from one to the other strangely.

"I was commissioned to tell you that they are getting hungry back there," he said. "It's nearly eight o'clock."

Ethel jumped to her feet.

"We're going right away now to cook the trout. We have five beauties."

"Very well."

"Aren't you going to have breakfast with us?" she asked, for he was turning away.

"No," he said shortly, "I'm off for the day."

And as they watched him he disappeared with long strides in the direction of the gorge. Neither did he once glance back.

* * * * * * *

When Forrest strode into camp that night his face was white with fatigue, but he wore an air of fixed purpose. He ate a few mouthfuls of broth in silence and then threw himself full length before the fire.

"You look tired, Bob," said Ethel.

"I am," he answered. His tone was gentle again, and he made an effort to smile up into her face as she bent toward him.

"Tired!" grumbled Onverell. "I never worked so hard in my life, and I thought I knew something about work, too. And now Strong says we have to begin to clear away brush tomorrow as a protection against forest fires."

"Forest fires!" exclaimed Forrest. "Why, we'll all be out of here within a week. I guess the fires can take all we leave and welcome."

Nobody answered this for a moment. Then Strong looked up from an axe handle that he was carving.

"It's better to be ready for an emergency," he said. "To be hemmed in here by forest fires would be uncomfortable and probably dangerous."

"Indeed," sneered Forrest. "By that line of argument you'll begin in a day or two to get ready for next winter."

"It might not be such a bad plan," assented Strong cheerfully. "We are above the snow line, and the winter is likely to be severe."

"Well," said Forrest deliberately, "just count me out. I take my orders from white men. No doubt you'd like to believe that this is going to last forever, and you seem to have hypnotized the rest of them into believing it, too. But I, for one, intend to get out, and my time's going to be spent in finding a way."

A momentary silence followed his words. Then Big Jim rose from his place by the fire and stretched his stiff muscles.

"Jove, I'm tired!" he exclaimed, yawning ostentatiously. "I hate to disturb anybody, but it's just about Jimmy's bed-time."

Mrs. Onverell looked at him gratefully.

"You big, lazy fellow," she said with a caress in every word. "What's the use of all that bone and muscle if not to work? Besides, you're losing flesh, and it's very becoming. Come, Ethel, I want you to help me find something. There's a dear."

Ethel rose to her feet.

"Good-night, everybody," she said, and started toward the door of the shack. As she passed Forrest he moved quickly and sprang to his feet,

walking beside her until they reached the shack. He held aside the blanket that she might pass in.

"Good-night," he said.

"Good-night, Bob," she answered him.

He bent close to her and seized her hand roughly.

"Don't you lose faith in me, Ethel," he said hoarsely. "I'm like a man lost in a fog, but don't you lose faith in me."

She looked at him gravely for a moment, deep into his eyes, and they shifted and fell.

"What are you thinking, Ethel?" he demanded nervously.

"I was wondering, Bob. You make me wonder, sometimes. Don't make me lose faith in you, Bob."

Then she slipped past him before he could answer her, and the blanket fell between them.

Forrest turned back to the fire.

"I want to talk to you, Strong," he said abruptly.

Strong, in the act of moving away, paused.

"Very well," he said cheerfully, "shall we sit down? It's more comfortable."

Forrest strode forward a few steps until he was face to face with the other.

"I want you to let her alone!" he said fiercely, with a jerk of his arm toward the shack.

Strong lifted his head and the two eyed each other for a long moment.

"Why?" said Strong at last.

Forrest gave full vent to the black rage that was in his heart.

"Why? Because every word and look of a jail-bird like you is an insult to her! Besides that, she belongs to me."

"She has not said so," answered Strong quietly. "You have said it, but she never has, neither in word nor look."

A sudden cold fear at Forrest's heart drove him to quick denial.

"She loves me!" he exclaimed, "I tell you she belongs to me, heart and soul."

"Then why should you fear me—or any other man?"

"Because you are not playing fair! She is young and impressionable. This thing has shaken her—she doesn't realize that it's just the novelty of it all that makes her happy to be with you."

Now the fear bit at the other's heart. He spoke slowly.

"Just what do you mean?"

Forrest began to walk up and down, pulling to pieces a twig he held in his hand, in a nervous way habitual with him.

"Every time I come around she's off somewhere with you. I can't get up early enough to find her nor wait long enough for her to come back. I want you to let her alone."

The peculiar, swift gleam of intense feeling came into Strong's eyes.

"You told me that once before, on the evening before the earthquake. I listened to you then, for under the old conditions I and my like were outcasts. But now I tell you it is different. It is doubtful when we get out of here—your days of searching must have convinced you of that. And what shall we find when we do get out? San Francisco is gone, and God knows how much else. The old conditions, where you could have given her so much more than I, are ended. I tell you they are ended. You're not able any longer to take care of her."

"What do you mean?" demanded Forrest, hotly.

"Because the only power you know how to make use of is money, and you're facing problems that can't be worked out in figures."

Forrest was silent for a moment, then he spoke with something of his old dignity.

"The man who can control money has intelligence enough to learn other things. However it may seem to you, Miss Stanton has promised to be my wife, and until she takes back that promise I have the right to object to your companionship for her."

There was a silence.

"You are right," said Strong slowly, at last. "As long as you prove that you are able to take care of her I shall remember what you say."

He walked over to the woodpile and threw a couple of logs on the dying fire. Then he turned again to Forrest abruptly.

"You have made too much of this," he said. "If you had asked for her company she would have been with you and not with me."

"Possibly," said Forrest disarmed. "I guess I have been pretty self-absorbed. I'll change all that, never fear."

"I shall not fear," said Strong, "as long as you prove that you are able to take care of her."

"Lord!" said Forrest stretching out his arms with his old genial laugh, "what would I give for a good cigar!"

Chapter XI

ETHEL awoke the next morning to a feeling of abundant life and energy, such as she had not known since she was a child. Her first thought was that she was glad to be alive; her second, a wonder as to what the day might bring. All days were wonderful things now, full of health and the out-of-doors. Time seemed to have swung back. As when she was a child every hour brought her a cycle of experience. Little things had become momentous and occasioned a joy that seemed out of proportion to its cause. She stretched herself out on her bed of ferns and listened lazily to the sounds that came from the outside. She heard the morning chorus of the birds and felt the dewy freshness of the mountain air. A little phrase repeated itself over and over in her mind—"The fullness of life." She felt that she understood it of late—"The fullness of life." She felt an agony of sorrow for every dead thing; for those whose lives had gone out so recently under falling walls, in smoke and flame; for the dead bird she had secretly buried yesterday; for the beetle lying on its back beside the path. "The fullness of life!" Had any life really an end? Could this

throbbing vital joy she felt within herself be lost in oblivion? No, it was a thing of flame and beauty, untouched by any earthly conditions. A sudden warmth of certainty seemed poured in upon her. She jumped to her feet, a little trill of song breaking from her lips as spontaneously as the song of the birds outside. She hurried into her clothes, still singing. All at once she stopped. A voice strong, yet musical, and just now vibrant with laughter came to her ears.

"Get at it cheerfully, Onverell. It's immensely good for you. The joy of work—that's a theme your sort of people don't know much about, eh?"

She put her hand to her throat unconsciously to still a sudden throbbing there. "The fullness of life!" Life was something much more than meat and drink, and hearing and sight. She felt that she stood on the edge of some great experience, beautiful far beyond anything she had ever known before.

"These are such wonderful days!" she said, aloud.

"Wonderful days!" echoed Mrs. Onverell sleepily, from her corner, "days without maids or hot water or coffee! If you want breakfast you have to get up and cook it yourself. What is wonderful about that?"

"The being alive," said Ethel, softly, her eyes full of light.

At breakfast Ethel heard Forrest's request for her company on the brush clearing expedition

without surprise. It seemed a part of the joy of the day that he should be himself again, willing to do his part with the rest gentle, even tender toward her. Only one thing troubled her. She was conscious that neither gentleness nor roughness on his part would have power to break the happy dream in which she seemed to be moving, the wonderful sense of expectancy, and this frightened her a little.

Meanwhile the day was not fulfilling its early promise. A haze was creeping over the sun, the wind veered to the north and began to blow with some force. Occasional gusts bent the tree-tops sharply and whistled down the cliffs with an ominous sound. As they rose to their feet at the conclusion of breakfast, one of these sudden puffs caught the ashes and live coals from the fire and scattered them widely. The women fled with laughing exclamations, and the men stamped out the coals wherever they had fallen. Jose and Strong glanced at each other rather anxiously.

"Suppose we carry some lunch with us and picnic under the trees at the north end of the canyon," suggested Mrs. Onverell. "It always lightens work to call it by some other name, and climbing rocks and pulling brush are regular accompaniments to all the picnics I remember."

"That's a cheerful suggestion," agreed Forrest heartily. "It conveys an idea of festivity that these excursions of ours usually lack. Moreover

a picnic implies that you have come to the picnic ground of your own choice and can leave again whenever you are tired of it.''

"I don't know about that," mused Onverell. "It depends upon your hostess. I've stayed at some picnics a long time after I was ready to go."

"Dame Nature seems to be that kind of a hostess,'' replied Forrest. "She arranged this picnic here for us; we were ready to leave four weeks ago, but she hasn't seemed willing."

"Perhaps the picnic isn't over yet,'' suggested Ethel. "Every day seems to have some new surprise."

Forrest looked at her, his face darkening. "Do you mean, Ethel, that you enjoy this sort of thing?" he demanded.

She met his look without embarassment. "I mean that, considering all we have escaped, we have much to be thankful for. And, yes, I mean that there doesn't seem to me any great hardship to be kept here for a few weeks in this beautiful place, living healthy lives and thinking healthy thoughts."

"Ethel, you're not far wrong!'' said Onverell, and Mrs. Onverell added: "Many a camping trip has been far more unpleasant. Think of all the grand opera we have escaped! And all the round of post-Easter functions. When I remember them, there is balm in Gilead.''

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Forrest, "are you really all content to stay here with the city in

ruins down there and all you own gone up in smoke, with nobody to save the wreckage for you if there is any? Why—"

"Don't be an ass, Bob," broke in Onverell. "Perhaps we're not all as contented as you imagine, but there's such a thing as 'takin' your medicine graceful!' Strong, what do you say about the picnic?"

"It seems to me we take Strong's medicine, not our own," retorted Forrest. "What difference does it make what he says?"

"Because he knows; I follow the man who knows."

"You make me sick!" exclaimed Forrest in disgust.

Strong, who had been talking aside with Jose, looked up.

"No picnic today; I'm afraid we're in for a hard norther. I had hoped that it was too late in the season for them, but there's no mistake about this."

"Oh, Mr. Strong!" said Mrs. Onverell in disappointment, and Ethel added:

"But just see how clear and beautiful everything is!"

In truth the haze had vanished, and cliffs and meadow stood out in a clear, many-hued light with wonderful distinctness. The others, noting it, exclaimed with pleasure, but Strong shook his head.

"That wonderful coloring is the sure fore-runner of the north wind. It seems to have a strange electrical effect on the atmosphere. See here."

He took a little leather note-book from his pocket and held it out to them. The covers were curled back as if subjected to a great heat. A little celluloid calendar protruded from the leaves. He rubbed this up and down against his sleeve. A sharp crackling noise resulted. "In the dark you could have seen the sparks," he said.

"Then you really think we can't have our picnic?" asked Ethel.

"Doesn't that answer your question?" he replied, as a sharp gust whirled dust into their faces. "In an hour it will be blowing so hard that you would be forced to seek shelter."

"I love the wind," declared Ethel, half rebellious.

"There are winds and winds."

"Lord, yes," broke in Jose, "why, ma'am, down in Texas I've seen the fleece blowed clear off a sheep's back 's if he'd been sheared."

"See here," exclaimed Forrest, "this is all rotten nonsense. The day's as beautiful a one as I ever saw. We're going to carry out our picnic as we planned."

"Have you ever experienced a north wind in these mountains?" asked Strong.

"No, but I guess we can stand it."

"I have," said Strong, decisively. "We probably shan't feel it here in this meadow-pocket

as we would out on the exposed mountain side, but we'll need to keep away from trees and the neighborhood of loose rock."

"Well, it will have to be worse than this to frighten me," declared Forrest. "I'm accustomed to gauging my own risks. Who will come with me to the end of the valley?"

Another gust of wind swept by them. It was filled with wonderful odors of pine and redwood, and the sound of it as it roared down from the upper levels was like a great organ note.

"I'll go!" said Ethel quickly. "I must. It's glorious, it calls to me. We won't go far nor stay long, and if it's bad up there we'll come back at once."

A look of triumph crossed Forrest's face. "That's good, common sense!" he said. "We'll certainly come back if it gets too much for us, but don't expect us soon. If you change your mind about the picnic you'll find us at the north cliff."

Mrs. Onverell and Jim looked at him uncertainly, but unaccustomed lines had appeared between Strong's brows. Forrest noted it, and as he passed him he spoke to him in a low tone.

"That's rather a flimsy excuse, Strong, to keep the girl away from me. Even she saw through it. I thought you meant to play fair."

Strong's eyes held him for a moment. Something flamed in their depths, then died out again,

and Forrest realized that he was talking to a man who had mastered his passions.

"I shall not interfere so long as you take care of her," he answered, with no trace of emotion.

Forrest felt the heat of the other's controlled anger react upon himself.

"You'll not interfere under any circumstances," he said fiercely.

"Not while everything is right with her," Strong repeated.

The look that leaped at him from Forrest's eyes as he turned away thrilled him with a sudden, overwhelming joy. It was hate, the hate a man bestows only upon a rival whom he fears. No man had looked at him in that way since the hour of his tragedy. To fear another is to acknowledge his power. For ten years Strong had known pity, tolerance, contempt, but never respect. In the quick rush of emotion that surged through him, he was conscious of the full measure of his restored manhood. For the first time the possibility of winning this girl crept into his mind. Never before had he entertained the thought of anything further than their present companionship. His hungry soul had found it enough; he had not looked beyond it. Now Forrest's own hand had opened the door for thoughts that left him amazed with new, wonderful possibilities. In his confusion he hardly noticed when she passed him, with something of the former coquetry in her

laughing, side-long glance. But as he looked after her he knew that the old relationship between them was ended. The open door could never be closed again; henceforward he was a man as other men, and the light of beautiful promise in her face was for him alone. The barrier that had loomed so large in his consciousness lost meaning and fell away. Nothing stood between them any longer but her own will. Truly, Forrest had brought about results that he did not purpose.

The wind by this time had lost its fitful character and increased to a steady gale. The air had taken on a peculiar chill. The sound of it among the pines and firs was like a mighty organ's music; the sight of their bending tops was profoundly impressive. As Forrest and Ethel made their way with difficulty along the stream, pine tassels and green sprays flashed by them in the sunshine, driven before the wind. Not a bird was to be seen. Apparently they had taken refuge in the depths of the hospitable firs. Young sugar pines, light and feathery, swayed almost to the ground. Silver pines, two hundred feet in height, bowed and chanted as if in worship, while their quivering foliage seemed kindled into a flame of white altar-fire.

"What sounds!" exclaimed Ethel, "what color and motion!" Her face was pale with excitement.

"Yes," assented Forrest, absently. "I never could see the use of winds. Seems like wasted energy."

Ethel was conscious of a sudden, keen disappointment. The edge of her delight in the storm seemed unaccountably blunted. She found herself wishing intensely for Strong, for his comments, his quiet delight in all natural, wholesome experiences, the bits of philosophy that he dropped unconsciously, stimulating her mind to think, her heart to feel. Could it be that those days in the valley-meadow were so rich and full for her because of his companionship? The thought was startling, following so closely upon that other revelation of the early morning. Was it only his personality that had seemed to fill the new life with such promise—promise of what? Her half-formed conviction of disloyalty to the man beside her was swallowed up. Her longing grew overwhelming for Strong's understanding presence with her in these ringing woods, which seemed everywhere filled with him, only him.

She was frightened by this glimpse of her heart. With flushed cheeks and a look half of defiance she turned to Forrest, who walked beside her absorbed in his own thoughts.

"Can't you say something?" she demanded, abruptly.

With the words came the understanding of all that the other would have said, and it did

not need Forrest's look of bewilderment to reveal to her how entirely at a loss he was to fill her need. What had they ever said to each other in the days before this great experience? How had their minds ever met on common ground? She found herself puzzling over it quite impersonally, and glanced at him once more with a little shock of contrition.

Of all this Forrest saw nothing. He strode along the path with head bent against the wind and gave an exclamation of relief when they reached their destination.

"Here we are," he exclaimed more cheerfully. "Now I'll get to work, and you make yourself comfortable there by that juniper."

But Ethel was gloriously excited by the storm which seemed to increase in volume every moment. Her hair was whipped about her face which glowed rosily, her eyes were alight. In such a mood inaction was not to be endured.

"I want to do my share, Bob," she said, "there's so much to do here always. Nobody can afford to be idle."

She fell to work, pulling up the long meadow grass and tossing it into a pile beside her, while he began to cut away the branches of a willow near by. But in a moment he stopped and looked at her discontentedly.

"Won't you do what I ask of you? I'm not Strong, to stand by and see a woman work. There's no need for you to spoil your hands."

Ethel laughed outright to discover how far away she had drifted from the old standard of lady-like indolence. Here was where Forrest's code would still have held her, and she had gone out from it so far into the new world of service, —the world that expected and needed her best. She moved impatiently.

"Pretty hands belonged to the old days. If they can't be useful hands they have no place here."

Forrest looked at her at last with some curiosity. He became conscious of something hostile in her attitude.

"Please yourself, of course," he replied. "If you want to work like a nigger, I won't make any objection."

She paused for a moment to regard him gravely. A conviction possessed her that it was only fair to try and make him understand.

"Don't you see, Bob," she said, "that a real woman isn't always going to be satisfied with trifles? The need of service is the deepest need of every created being, though sometimes it requires an earthquake to show us the truth."

He looked at her, branch in hand, a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"How changed you are, Ethel," he said.

She shrugged her shoulders as if throwing off a responsibility. "Then you'd better change, too, Bob, for the man I marry must let me share in everything that makes up our lives together."

Forrest's bewilderment grew. "Everything?" he repeated, incredulously.

"Yes. A year or two ago a large city gave a certain man a contract to build a postoffice. Before the work was well begun the man died. His wife took up his contract and carried the building on to completion for the honor of his name. Another man owned a large wholesale business. Hard times came and the man was on the point of failure. He was afraid to tell his wife, and contemplated suicide. But she found out all about it, and while he lay sick, from shock and worry, she went into the wholesale house and coaxed unwilling clerks and cajoled pressing tradespeople and carried things along day by day until the crisis was over. When he was well again he found his business in better condition than ever. That's the kind of wife I want to be."

A peculiar expression crossed Forrest's face. "I'd rather you kept your hands off my business," he said rather grimly.

She looked at him with disconcerting directness.

"Are you afraid of what I might find out?"

"Of course not," he said shortly, flushing in spite of himself.

She turned away from him and began to pull vigorously at the grass and weeds. The wind, which had paused for a moment as if to gather energy, leaped at them down the canyon in a long-drawn, ominous roar.

"Listen to that," she exclaimed in some dismay.

He threw down the branch he held and crossed over to her.

"Ethel," he said rather hoarsely. "You've changed so much in other ways—it hasn't made you feel any different towards me, has it?"

She hesitated. What she would have said neither one of them was to know. At that moment the gust of wind which they had heard approaching struck the fringe of the wood where they were with appalling fury. Branches and leaves fled before it, the breath was beaten from their bodies; close at hand there was a sharp, warning crack, and a great oak, rotten at the heart, fell prostrate at the foot of the cliff.

"We must get away from these trees," gasped Ethel. "Mr. Strong was right, it was not safe to come."

It was a wrong suggestion, the use of Strong's name, she saw it at once. Forrest's look, which had expressed only hesitation, grew ugly and determined.

"Strong!" he exclaimed. "Do you think I'm not as much of a man as Strong, and as well able to take care of you? Come here with me under the trees until this blows over. It's our best chance of shelter."

He caught her by the arm, but she wrenched herself free.

"It's not safe," she cried, "look at that!"

A large limb whirled by them and fell a few feet away.

"I tell you to come with me!" he shouted above the roar of the wind, but she leaped suddenly back, pointing over his head.

"Bob," she cried, "Oh, Bob!"

Awed by her look, he turned quickly. "God!" he exclaimed. He felt himself caught and hurled far away into oblivion, and darkness closed over him.

* * * * *

Strong was at work lustily propping supports against the shack, which threatened to go over, when it seemed to him that he heard himself called in the voice whose every tone he knew by heart. He looked up sharply. No one was in sight, but this did not surprise him. The sixth sense that belongs to the dweller in solitudes had served him in this way before. He threw down his hammer without a moment's hesitation, and, calling to Jose to follow, ran toward the northern end of the valley as swiftly as an Indian.

In a few moments he had caught sight of her. "Here I am," he shouted to her above the shrieking wind, and her answering cry held no surprise, only a great thankfulness. She was bending over the prostrate body of Forrest, whom it was evident, by the broad trail through the brush and her own exhaustion, that she had dragged from under the trees out into the open meadow. His face was a

dark crimson, his clothes were torn. He showed no sign of consciousness.

Strong uttered an exclamation and bent over him.

"He would take shelter there among the trees," said Ethel. "Two of them fell, and the second one caught him. Will he live?"

"He is only stunned, I think," said Strong, rising. "He will come to himself presently. But you—"

"I am all right," she said, hastily, unable to meet his look. "I saw it coming and so escaped."

"Were you frightened?"

"Oh, dreadfully, especially because I felt that I was doing wrong to be here. Like a child, I expected the punishment to follow."

He laughed and she joined in his laughter. And suddenly everything seemed attuned to laughter—the intense blue of the sky, the lessening music of the wind, the faint, reviving chirp of the birds. A strange happiness possessed them both. Still she did not dare meet his look, for the moment of his coming had been another moment of revelation in the wonder of its relief and joy.

Jose, who had followed closely after Strong, came panting up. "Phew! Seems to me you need a veterinary here," he remarked.

"You mean a doctor, I suppose," said Strong.

"Nope, I don't. It takes a veterinary to doctor a mule."

They carried Forrest back to camp on an improvised stretcher. At Strong's assurance that he would be all right in a day or two they left Annunciata to attend on him and ate their picnic dinner around the fire, for the wind was falling rapidly. The happy confusion that possessed Ethel rang in her voice and broke out into bubbling laughter, it looked shyly and sweetly out of her eyes. Strong's voice also was deep with a a new resonance, though he spoke little, and to the words he did not utter her soul was listening. It was too soon for either to question or consider; they were conscious only that behind each simple look or act of theirs toward each other lay some beautiful meaning.

Forrest, coming to himself again in the shelter of the shack, heard their voices with the strange, new note in them and knew that he was defeated. Weak, suffering, full of morbid self-pity, he turned his face to the wall and buried it among the pillows.

Chapter XII

TWO days later, in the gray of a cloudy morning, Forrest dragged himself up from the fern bed Annunciata had made for him at the rear of the shack and came with unsteady steps toward the fire, where Onverell sat talking with Jose. The north wind was still blowing, but it was little more now than a fresh breeze. To Forrest, in his weakened condition, its peculiar chill was very penetrating, and he held out his hands to the blaze like an old man.

Breakfast was over and the rest of the party had disappeared. Annunciata's voice was heard near by, crooning a weird sort of a chant, but Onverell and Jose were the only two in sight. Onverell was working over a rude box that he was fashioning for some necessity of his wife's, and looked up as Forrest approached.

"Well, Bob," he said, cheerfully, "feeling better? That was a hard knock you got."

"I'm all right," muttered Forrest.

Jose regarded him with something like a grin twisting his battered countenance.

"They say children and fools has luck," he remarked. Forrest made no reply except to stare at him, and Jose relapsed into a chuckle.

"You were lucky to get off so easy," agreed Onverell, resuming work on his box. He was evidently of the opinion that a little light conversation would be good for the invalid.

"I suppose so," assented Forrest without interest.

"What were you up there among the trees for?" questioned Onverell. "Ethel didn't tell us much about the accident."

"Queer time of day for anybody to think he's a bird," said Jose, still chuckling.

"Confound the accident!" exclaimed Forrest, "I'm sick of it."

"You sure do look slim," said Jose. Evidently something tickled him mightily.

"All right, of course," returned Onverell rather stiffly, but Forrest got up from his place all at once and walked over to him with an air of determination.

"Look here, Onverell, I'd like to talk to you alone a few moments."

"That means me for the timber," said Jose, sadly, and he walked slowly away.

"What is it, old man?" asked Onverell, his warm heart rallying to any suggestion of need. "Sit down here, you look rather seedy yet. Let's talk it over."

Forrest sat down obediently. His face was white, but it was not bodily weakness that gave it the expression Onverell had noted.

"Jim," he said, "haven't you seen what was going on here?"

"What do you mean, Bob?"

"I mean Strong. Jim, he's trying to win Ethel away from me, and if something isn't done about it he may succeed."

"Oh, come now, Bob." Onverell looked at him in some alarm. The idea, never having occurred to his unsuspecting nature, seemed so preposterous that he wondered if Forrest were not delirious.

"It's the truth," said Forrest more quietly. "He's a dangerous man, any one must acknowledge that, and she's shut into this place with him where she can't help seeing him day after day. Then he knows just enough about life in the open to pose as a hero under these circumstances. She's forgotten what his past is. I'm not blaming her, she's just drifting, but he knows what he's about."

"Are you sure?" asked Onverell, remembering vaguely certain things that seemed to lend credence to Forrest's statement.

"Sure? Yes, I'm sure. Why, man, haven't you noticed? She goes fishing with him, she goes hunting with him. He brings her the first violets, he teaches her how to trap a rabbit. And she is charmed with it all; she has no eyes nor ears for any one but Strong. Surely you have noticed."

"Well, perhaps," admitted Onverell.

"You see. Then aren't you enough my friend to help me put a stop to it?"

"But—" said Onverell.

"Look here, Jim, you are more or less responsible for this thing. The man was invited to your home. Why, you don't seem to realize what it will mean to her, leaving me out of it, when we get away from here—and no one in his senses supposes we're going to stay here forever."

Onverell's brows came together in a frown of intent thought.

"You're right," he said at last. "I hope you exaggerate the thing, but, at any rate, you're right. I ought to have noticed. They mustn't be together again."

"Then you'll help me?" asked Forrest, a light coming into his eyes. He had never loved Ethel so well as in these hours of uncertainty. The wish to possess her utterly was like a fever in his veins. His ears were strained to catch the lightest accent of her voice, his eyes followed her burningly.

"What do you want me to do?" asked Onverell.

"I want you to speak to Strong, to tell him to let her alone."

"That's not easy, Bob."

"It's got to be done. My hands are tied because my interest in the matter bars me out. But you can remind him of that dirty past of his that he seems to have forgotten, and tell him

that to force his companionship on any decent woman is an insult. I tell you, Onverell, that if the thing isn't ended there's going to be trouble. I won't stop at anything."

"We'll fix it up somehow, Bob, don't you worry."

"You'll speak to him, then?"

"Yes, if that will do the work."

"It's got to do the work, or else I'll end the thing in my own way."

"All right. I'll see what he says about it."

"He's coming now. I'll go and give you your chance."

Forrest strode off in the direction of the brook. Onverell stared after him, the frown on his good-natured face growing deeper. He did not look around when Strong approached, though he was aware that he had paused beside him.

"Our friend is himself again, I see," remarked Strong, his glance also following Forrest's rapid retreat.

Onverell studied the box in his hand for a moment.

"No," he said at length, "Forrest isn't all right, Strong."

"Not feeling quite up to the mark, eh? Well, it was a nasty fall."

"It's more than the fall that's wrong with him, much more."

Onverell raised his head and looked Strong squarely in the eyes. There was significance in the glance, and Strong's face settled into the expressionless mask he had learned to wear in the past. Seeing him so, Onverell was startled to remember how his whole look and manner had altered of late.

"You mean—?" questioned Strong quietly.

"I think you know what I mean, Strong. I think any honorable man would keep hands off."

The eyes of the two men met squarely, and in Strong's there was something masterful, something that did not falter nor concede. It was the look of a man who knew his ground and was prepared to defend it. Onverell was conscious of a sudden thrill of respect. This was no longer the social outcast he had received so grudgingly into his house. Dimly he began to suspect something of the man's real strength, and to realize that other and bigger forces were at work here than either he or Forrest knew.

"Will you be good enough to state your meaning plainly," said Strong again.

Onverell bolstered his failing resolution. "Why, you see, Forrest and Miss Stanton are—that is, there's an understanding between them; has been for some time. You—she leaves him alone day after day while she goes fishing or hunting or tramping through the woods with you. Naturally, he objects."

There was a moment's pause, then Strong spoke again, still quietly.

"I understand that you are speaking as Mr. Forrest's friend."

"Yes."

"Have you forgotten that Miss Stanton is a free agent?"

"Confound it, Strong," broke out Onverell hotly, "can't you see what you are doing to the girl? I tell you we won't stand for it. She's here as my guest. I'm responsible to her people for her. Even if she was not promised to my friend, I couldn't stand for it. You certainly don't need that I should tell you why?"

"I might remind you that I am also your guest," said Strong slowly.

Onverell bit his lip. "Yes, of course," he began.

"As you say, you stand in the place of Miss Stanton's guardians, but even that does not give you the right to draw conclusions as to her feeling toward anyone. It is not a matter to be discussed between gentlemen. But for myself, you are right, I love her and I shall win her if I can."

"Then Forrest was not mistaken!" exclaimed Onverell.

"Forrest!" said Strong. "She belongs to the best, the strongest. The old order of things which would have given her to him has been swept away. Even if we get out of here we'll go back to a city of ruined fortunes, where the conditions

to be faced can only be met by strong men. A man's past will be a clean slate. There will be new standards, new opportunities. It is what one can do now that will count, what he may be able to do in the future."

The truth of this came home to Onverell like a blow. He saw, as never before, how completely the old order of things might have passed away; how that which might have been impossible was impossible no longer. In primitive conditions force was the only lord.

"It will be the days of '50 over again," went on Strong, kindling with the bigness of the vista his words called up. "We'll have to build a new city. I tell you, none but the strong man will have any place there. All the old ruts are ploughed out. Life will never be the same again for us, my friend, and the woman will belong to the one who can take care of her."

"And you, of course, are that man!" said Forrest's voice hoarsely behind them. He parted the willows by the brook and came toward them. The intensity of his feeling had driven him back to the battle-ground of his hopes. Evidently he had heard enough to rouse him to fierce anger. His face was crimson and his eyes bloodshot. He approached Strong quickly, his arms swinging at his sides as if he with difficulty refrained from striking at him. Onverell, in some alarm at his look, placed a restraining hand on his shoulder, but he shook it off.

"Let me alone, Onverell, I won't be made a fool or a child of any longer. A strong man, is he? Well, he'll find that I'm a strong man, as well as clever enough to see through his schemes and to block them."

"Come now, Bob—"

"So you swallow all this, too, do you, Onverell; about the world being made over new, with a chance for every jail-bird to bury his past and walk off with all the prizes? I want to ask you one thing—if that new world out there is going to do so much for him, why isn't he in a bigger hurry to get back to it? He could have us out of here in twenty-four hours if he wanted to. —Yes, you could, Strong, and you know it. A man with your knowledge of wood-craft could find a dozen ways of escape if you wanted to escape."

"You're mad," said Onverell.

"No, I'm not mad. See, he doesn't deny it. He means to keep us here, I tell you. He's playing his own hand and we're his pawns. Don't you see what he wants? They'll go on with their hunting and fishing trips until the girl has to marry him. That's the kind of strong man he is, damn him—"

"You hound!"

It was Strong's voice at last. A white-faced girl, who had come unnoticed to the door of the shack, found herself thrilling from head to foot

for joy at the words and the way in which they were spoken.

For Forrest had struck out, blind with rage, and Strong had shaken him off as one shakes off a child, so that he staggered and fell. And Strong towered above him with blazing eyes and fist clenched, hurling hot words at him that hit as square and true as blows.

"You dare to call yourself the protector of this girl, when it's your own tongue that has spoken the first word to defame her! Say that you lied—say it!"

The man at his feet writhed a little, then Ethel caught the muttered words, "I lied."

"You fool!" said Strong, and the words hissed like the fall of a lash. "You can't even take care of yourself nor save your own skin when you're thrown out of the only environment you know. And you would reach your futile, dirty hands up to claim her, a woman as fine and white as a lily."

Ethel, listening at the blanket which formed the shack door, thrilled again with the joy which is the joy of the primitive woman seeing herself desired supremely and contended for by two masterful wills. She was wholly feminine at that moment—wholly human. For an instant she experienced the world-old sensation that all this had happened to her before, long ago. She pressed her hand against her heart to quiet its beating and strained her ears to listen. She half expected

Strong to turn from the prostrate body of his enemy, and, seizing her in an iron embrace against which it would be useless to struggle, bear her away, helpless yet unafraid, to some far cave he called his home.

Then she started with a quiver of her whole body, for Strong had turned away from the inert Forrest, who made no effort to rise. He was coming straight toward her. She grew faint for a moment; the beating of her heart shook her; she half swayed toward him and closed her eyes, as if she felt the strength of his arms about her. Then she gave a quick gasp, for he had passed the shack so closely that the sleeve of his shirt brushed her hand, and the glimpse she had of his face as he passed dulled the wild beating of her heart into a heavy quiet, for it was white, tense, stricken.

Strong had neither seen nor felt her presence. Another face was before his eyes. Forrest's inert form stretched on the ground at his feet, forehead crimson and veins swollen with rage, had called all up in a moment another scene like this. Forrest's had become the swollen purple face of his commanding officer, leering up at him horribly from the ground. Before it his passion went out like a dying flame, and he turned and strode off into the thick woods, farther and farther away toward the fallen boulder that marked the only entrance to the meadow. He hurried along like

a man who is hunted, not following any regular path, but parting the branches of the trees before him, forcing his way recklessly through the tangle of undergrowth. So, at last, after an interval of effort that left him breathless but calmer, he emerged on the very shoulder of the fallen rock, at a point where he could look out over the broken trail and the thousand-foot chasm below.

Without his full recognition his movements had possessed meaning and purpose. In the tumult and surge of tragic memories and new born fears something was beating against the doors of his consciousness persistently—imperatively. It was this he had come out here to face, alone. As soon as he relaxed the tension of his body and dropped exhausted on a rock to breathe, he knew why he had come and what he must do.

Forrest had declared, before he had forced the lie back into his cringing face, that he, Strong, could find a way out of the valley if he chose. Strong, sitting there alone, his head buried in his arms, knew that it was not a lie. There were ways he had not tried, many ways, and each held a fair promise of success. Looking into his soul he knew that he had not intended to get away, that the very thought was an agony that had threatened to wreck all the patiently wrought fabric of his manhood. It was against this suggestion that he had fought; it was to stifle it that he had stretched this other man at his feet, and

only the mercy of God had prevented a repetition of a former tragedy. He sat there appalled at such self-revelation, sick with loathing of himself and fear of what he knew he must do. Yet he argued with his heart fiercely, putting the inevitable moment off—holding it back.

"What is there for her out there more than I could give her here?—a ruined city; her father's fortune swept away like countless others; pestilence, possibly; certain famine. Here is safety, peace, long days, golden sunsets, quiet nights under the stars, health, and the song of birds."

He would have added, the beauty of their companionship, but for the realizing sense that such companionship was possible no longer. Others had laid rude hands upon it, the deepening knowledge of their own hearts had forced them beyond its safe barrier out into uncertain waters. Henceforth it must be either more or less. Which? The cry of his longing was almost an audible thing in its intensity. Was he, a man whose life had been a waste and desert place with scarcely a flower, to give up, even as she was won, this woman in whose eyes lay the land of promise for his weary soul?

The noon-day sun lay hot upon the meadow, which swam in a golden haze. One or two buzzards circled lazily overhead. The heat of approaching summer was tempered by the hidden snows of the upper canyons into an atmosphere

of balmy freshness that touched his body with radiant warmth. The meadow at this noon hour seemed a garden of forgetfulness—a drowsy, lotus-eating paradise. Its call was the honey-sweet song of some eastern houri, inviting the tired traveler to rest and delights that steal from him forever the memory of his wanderings. To the very centre of his being he thrilled in response to this call, with its magic lure of heart's desire. He groaned and buried his head in his arms.

Then something seemed all at once to draw him to his feet so that he stood erect. And out of the flame of the noontide she came along the trail his hasty flight had left and stood beside him. He turned his face from the light of promise in her eyes and said no word to her, because the greatness of the tumult in his heart left him dumb.

So at last she was forced to speak, though her look grew wistful and uncertain at the necessity he laid upon her to bare her heart.

"I had to come," she said, "because I seemed to know what it was you were going to do."

He looked at her still dumbly. For what he felt there were no words. So she went on again, hesitating pitifully, searching his face.

"I heard what they said, I saw by your look what you would do. Must it really come to an end, all these wonderful days? This is the dawn meadow. I know now that I never lived before I found it. It holds in its arms the day and all her promises."

"But not their fulfillment," he answered her, breaking his silence at last, and the words were the stifled agony of his heart.

"Where will that be?" she half whispered.

"God knows."

She moved a little towards him, her fingers touching his sleeve. The woman he had called to life, the soul that slept beneath butterfly wings, looked at him from her eyes. He grew white, his breath came in a quick gasp—then, suddenly, his arms were about her with all the iron intensity she had fancied, his lips were pressed on hers.

"I love you!" he said, "I love you! You are my life and soul!"

She clung to him with hands that trembled. "Let me stay with you," she pleaded, "don't send me away."

"You could be happy with me?" he asked, incredulous, in spite of all her eyes told him.

"Anywhere, with you."

"But have you forgotten what I am—?

She placed her hand over his lips. "You are my strong man."

"But the other—Forrest?"

"There is no other—I know now that there never was."

The light of the noontide fell about them; she raised her eyes to his face and their promise was all fulfilled. Doubts, scruples, hesitation were forgotten; he tasted his first draught of a happi-

ness that seemed to steal away his senses, he set foot at last in his own country.

Then, all at once, a sound broke the divine silence in which they were wrapped. It was the long-drawn, distant, but unmistakable whistle of a railroad train.

Chapter XIII

STRONG raised his head and stared incredulously in the direction of the distant sound.

"What was that!" he said.

As a little while before the sight of his face had stilled the rapid beating of her heart and driven her to follow him across the ragged trail his flight had made, so now something in his tone pierced through the wonder of the moment like a blow.

"It was a train whistle," she answered mechanically.

"You heard it? Then there is no mistake! Good God!"

She looked at him in dull wonder, jealous that anything should break in upon their perfect moment.

"Don't you understand what it means," he said, in a voice so altered that she would not have recognized it, "don't you see?"

"What?" she questioned, a feeling of cold dismay growing at her heart.

"If there are trains, there must be railroads; and if there are railroads, there must be a city, many cities. Things out there must be about as they have always been. And we have believed—what haven't we believed!"

He broke off abruptly and they stood in silence, looking out over the pass with strained eyes that seemed to see the bustle and traffic of the great city. As if that distant whistle had been a signal, the channel of past experiences, so magically closed for a few brief weeks, was thrown open once more and the old life rushed in upon them and drove them back with a dizzying swirl into thoughts and habits of past years.

The effect upon Strong was strange and terrible. His shoulders lost their erectness and settled into their former droop. The light of freedom and hope in his face dimmed and went out, and in their place the expressionless mask, which had been his defense against the world, settled over it heavily. It seemed that nothing could ever lift it again. The old Strong stood there at last, the social outcast, the man who bore the heavy burden of a life tragedy. He took his arms from about the girl and stepped back.

At this she looked up at him. "They are all out there, just as usual, perhaps," she said slowly, "shopping, dancing, going to the opera. Perhaps my father and mother are there, wondering about me." Then her voice broke into a quick cry. "Oh, don't take your arms away from me! Let me feel your love, let me feel it!"

But he stood quiet, and his head was bent.

"It is all so strange," she said again, "so very lonely."

His arms made an involuntary gesture towards her, then they fell at his side.

"It will seem all right in a little while," he answered soothingly, "after all, it is more natural this way than the other. We must get out of here and find out the truth."

"Then we must go away from here?"

"Yes, it is right."

"When?"

"Now, at once. We have stayed here too long already."

"Oh no, don't say that—don't ever say that."

His face softened, he straightened his drooping shoulders a little.

"You are right," he said, and his voice was deep and richly musical. "Whatever comes, we will not say that."

He moved away from her toward the trail by which she had followed him. She watched his movements with dry, intent eyes.

"Come," he said, "there are things to be done, but not here. No one shall ever come here again."

He held the branches aside for her to pass, then drew them close again. Along the trail as she moved before him, he pulled the underbrush back into its place, obliterating the marks of their passing.

In silence they made their way back to the meadow level and stopped beside the brook a little way from camp. She understood without

words that he was preparing to take measures for their release, and she felt that he would be successful. A mist of pain and trouble was all about her; she saw and heard dimly, as if from far away. But he worked feverishly, as a man will who has a task beyond his strength and fears to fail. So she refrained from any word or question, and sat quietly on a rock near by, her eyes following him as before. She did not offer to help him as she would have done yesterday. In his stern hour of renunciation there was no place for her. She sat quiet and waited, without hope or expectancy.

First, he made a pile of dead leaves and twigs and branches. These he kindled with a spark struck from a stone. When it was blazing hotly he began to strip green leaves and branches from the neighboring trees and threw them onto the blazing pile. The fresh sap hissed and sputtered; the blaze died down, and a thick, sullen smoke rose in its place. The north wind, which still blew lazily, carried this smoke far up over the tops of the trees and even past the cliffs and into the forest beyond. He stood looking at it for a moment, noting the direction of the wind carefully. Then he threw on more wood, dry and green, and, putting his finger to his lips, blew a shrill whistle three or four times in succession.

Ethel heard the answering shouts from the camp, and soon could distinguish the approaching footsteps and voices. Still watching Strong's

face she saw the muscles about his mouth quiver at Onverell's hail and felt the keen response to his suffering in her own heart. She knew that from this hour her life was bound up in his life; that love had laid on her the burden of his pain, his strange, sad destiny. Yet she was not afraid, only glad with a very great gladness.

The others came up, full of the excitement and the questions that attend the least happenings in solitary places. But when they saw Strong's tensely quiet look and Ethel's eyes, shining out of her pale face, they became aware that something unusual and momentous was taking place, and they accepted Strong's few words of explanation silently, awed by his manner.

"I want you to help make a smudge here that will be seen by the forest rangers on the higher levels. It is their duty to follow up the source of every fire. They will discover us and get us out."

Forrest, who had followed slowly behind the others, started forward at the words. His eyes sought Ethel's, hot, eager words rushed almost visibly to his lips. But at the sight of her look he checked himself, and the words died away unspoken, his flushed face turned white. For her he existed no longer; her eyes looked quietly past him, watching Strong's movements.

But Onverell's excitement was rising rapidly. "That's a great idea!" he exclaimed. "Why

didn't we any of us think of it before?" Then he stopped, and his jaw fell suddenly. "Will there be any rangers? They've probably hit the trail for somewhere else before now."

"We have been too credulous," replied Strong, his voice quite without expression. "We didn't make enough allowance for the imagination of a drunken Indian. An hour ago I heard the whistle of the train that runs to the junction fourteen miles away. That is a branch road. The fact that it is being used means that the main line is in order, and whatever disturbance the earthquake has caused, probably only a local matter, has already been remedied."

"Why, then—" exclaimed Mrs. Onverell in the high voice of excitement. "Why, then—"

Their faces completed her unfinished sentence. They were all seeing the same mental picture, San Francisco as they had left it four weeks ago; its crooked streets; dusty brown houses, whose weather-beaten exteriors concealed rare treasure of art and luxury within; the big masses of stone and concrete that formed the down-town section; the whole bustling, teeming with gay, irresponsible, insolent life. As in most great experiences, the reaction against the tragedy of loss and terror, once begun, was complete. The old city, the old life was restored to them in a moment of time, untouched by change or disaster. Already the emotions and experiences of the last four weeks

began to seem far away, the whole situation monstrous and unbelievable.

Mrs. Onverell spoke again, and her eyes were alight with a new expression, no longer clear and limpid with the long, simple thoughts of the open, but sparkling, complex, dangerous. "Zinkand's!" she murmured, "the Palace Grill! Market Street! the Columbia, the milliner, the modiste! Well, it is still good to be alive! We'll meet at the Palace one week from tonight, when Ethel and I have had time to get some gowns, and celebrate the oddest adventure that ever befell a house party."

"Kindly let me out on that, ma'am," said Jose promptly. "A restaurant on the water front's more my style." He glanced at Annunciata's dark face, "unless you make it a quiet table in some nice little show garden for me and the lady here."

The Indian woman met his glance with indignation. She did not understand the words, but felt that he was making her an object of sport.

"Ai yi!" she cried fiercely, turning her back to him.

Mrs. Onverell's gay, amused glance following the two, fell suddenly upon Strong. She paused, her face changed subtly, swiftly. What would the familiar world that was to claim them all so soon do with this man? He stood apart once more, a lonely figure touched with tragedy, strip-

ped of the transient glory of his leadership. Out there in the restored city the sceptre of power was hers, her word might give him a place and a name. Should she speak it? She had only to confirm her carelessly spoken invitation, and she opened the door to him that had been closed so long. Behind it lay, for a man of his talents, success, advancement. She glanced up and her eyes met Forrest's burning gaze fixed upon her. Behind him she saw the white face of Ethel, quiet, watching. Yes, that open door might lead him at last to the girl. The tension of the moment held them all. There was the making or marring of lives, perhaps, in the silence that fell upon them, in the words that should break it.

But the spell of the dawn meadow was not entirely shattered by the tide of changing thought which had swept them back so swiftly into the old ways. Long hours of deep, quiet breathing under the open sky; the sharp, sudden contact with the primitive; its leveling of distinctions and its exaltation of the simple, elemental qualities which lie at the root of all greatness—the effect of all this was still written upon her heart and mind, in proportion as she had lent herself to the influences about her. Perhaps it never would be entirely effaced, even in the gay, thoughtless years to follow. She raised her head once more. The fingers of the north wind touched her forehead as with a caress, the smoke arose about her,

pungently sweet. Through its drifting folds, reaching now far into the afternoon sky, she saw a man stand with bent head. A pang of sympathy and understanding shot through her. She knew that his hands, preparing the branches for the fire that should light them to liberty, were plaiting for himself a crown of thorns. If there was submission in the bent head there was dignity also. Suddenly she held out her hand to him and lifted to him a face alight with genuine feeling.

"Mr. Strong, you must be the guest of honor at our party of reunion, for we all know in our hearts that without you our valley would have been a dreary prison with small hope of escape. Say that you will come."

Strong took her hand in his and looked down into the glowing face. Again there was a moment of breathless tension. She had opened the door to him, would he enter it? That pride was fighting sharply was evidenced by the slow color that mounted to his forehead. Resentment, too, had its place, but most of all the passionate desire to wrest from the world, unaided, all that it denied him, so that its acceptance as a free gift at the hand of a woman seemed a mean and unworthy thing. But it was for moments such as these that the suffering of past years and the strength that he had learned to wrest from it had been fitting him. He waited quietly, looking down into her face until pride, resentment, self assertion passed

one after the other and left his brain calm. Then his eyes, that studied her face so closely, began to see all at once the unwonted sweetness, the genuine feeling that had lain behind her words. He saw how, in a moment, she had thrown down all the barriers that society had built up against him, that she held out her hand to him to help him step across them, to realize their nothingness.

He grew ashamed, repentant. The influences in which he believed so profoundly had been at work here for him also. The gift which this woman offered him was her highest realization of service, it was also the crown and seal of his long struggle to give the world a worthy life for the unworthy one he had taken from it. This was his supreme moment, and he had been in danger of losing it. His glance sought the faces about him—Forrest's, white with the pallor of defeat; Onverell's, half dismayed, but with real friendliness in the eyes that met his. Last of all he turned to Ethel where she sat, passive, uplifted by her love beyond either fear or desire, awaiting his will. And this look on her face, the face that had been the light of his longing, hopeless dreams for so many years, brought the moisture to his eyes. Surely these weeks in the dawn meadow had been a new birth to them all, the world to which they were going back could not be the same world as before, since they themselves were different. Once more the sense of hope and

freedom rushed in upon him; the droop left his shoulders, and he stood erect.

He answered the sweet friendliness of Mrs. Onverell's glance with a smile whose tenderness was not for her, but for the girl for whose sake he would hereafter reverence all women.

"I will come," he said.

They set to work at brush and branches with a will, making a smudge that rolled far up over the tree tops and was carried by the afternoon breeze across the face of the western sky. At sunset the rangers came, three of them, outlined against the yellow glow as they dismounted from their horses and stood looking down into the valley.

"We must lie low," said Strong, "or they may content themselves with shouting us a warning and ride away again. If they see nobody they'll have to find some way of getting down. Then we can explain our situation."

They hid among the aspens by the brook and watched and laughed with the joy of successful conspirators,—all but Forrest, who had withdrawn earlier into the shelter of the woods to hide the bitterness of his heart. They were full of an excitement that demanded expression, the long strain was relaxed. They laughed silently as they saw the rangers make their way from point to point, seeking a descending trail into the meadow, only to pause at last in evident bewilderment.

"'Tain't so easy, pardner," exclaimed Jose, "or we'd a been gone before now to where the drinks is."

"See what they're doing," said Ethel. She sat nestled near to Strong, chin on hand. She was beautiful in her self-forgetting earnestness, more beautiful than Strong had ever seen her. He forgot their rescue and the manner of it in watching her, and more than once he found the moisture in his eyes.

"By gum!" said Jose, again, "they're going to swing down by a rope and cut steps in that there sandstone cliff. That's an old trick. Why, I've done that thing in Texas where the night was black as your hat and everything covered with sleet that thick you couldn't find the rock underneath it."

"Jose," said Onverell, "isn't your imagination a little—er—stimulated by the prospect of escape?"

"Stimmylated!" retorted Jose, mournfully, "well, not much! without you'd call this here river water stimmylatin! It's like a preacher man who was exhortin' with me onct. 'Son!' he says, 'come and join the army of salvation.' 'What division of that there army?' says I. 'The Temperance division, son,' says he. 'That's not the army, that there's the navy,' says I. But wait, things is goin' to be different when I strike that Frisco town."

One of the men on the cliff's edge had fastened a rope under his arm pits. The other two stood ready to let him down. He had a hatchet in his hand. Now he swung off into space and found a momentary footing a little below the rim of the cliff. They caught the distant sound of the hatchet against the sandstone and saw the debris come hurtling down to be lost among the trees. Then those on top lowered him a few feet further.

It was the northern end of the cliff where they had chosen to make their descent. A few of these artificial steps brought the ranger to the long column of juniper trees that clung to the face of the cliff. Here he waited a few moments while the other two came down to him, hand over hand. In a little while they appeared again at the foot of the wooded shoulder.

Then they paused and seemed to consider. Something about the nature of the smoke, still rising thickly from below, seemed to trouble them. One of them bent over and put his hands to his mouth like a trumpet.

"Anybody down there?" he called. His voice came to them faintly.

Jose, who had gathered his long figure on the circumference of a tree stump, let forth a yell that would have done credit to a Comanche, and shot off his stump, running in the direction of the north cliff at top speed.

"Blanked if it ain't old Jimmy Tufts, Red Jimmy, that worked with me on the range!"

he shouted back to the men who had gotten to their feet and were following him. Then to the distant figure on the shoulder of the cliff he began to pour out a picturesque greeting that surpassed any of his previous efforts.

"Why, you old snoozer, what in the blankety blank are you doing here! Want to join our little picnic-party? This is sure one blank of a joke!"

How much the rangers understood of this it was impossible to say. Enough, at least, to put an end to their hesitation and bring them overhand down the rope which they fastened to the lowest juniper tree. When they reached the ground they rushed upon the advancing Jose with one accord. What tale he told them, punctuated by what bursts of laughter and vocal fireworks, the onlookers could only guess. But in a few moments he turned to Strong.

"Here's where you make your get away," he called. "Take your best clothes and hustle along. Uncle Sammy's boys 'll have you out of here in an hour."

"So it's good-bye to the meadow," said Onverell.

"And its hail to a hot bath and an evening gown and a supper at Zinkand's, with steak three inches thick!" exclaimed Mrs. Onverell joyously. "The meadow will wait for us until we come again."

"If it doesn't become a lake," said Strong.

"Come on, Bob," called Onverell to Forrest, who appeared just then, haggard and sullen, at the edge of the wood. "Get whatever's dear to you and come along. We're out of here right away."

"Thank God," he answered briefly, turning toward the shack.

"So it's good-bye to the meadow," repeated Ethel softly. "Look, here is our four weeks' dream of an earthly paradise, a poem all bound in gold."

The yellow sunset light flooded the cup-like valley to the brim, filled it until it overflowed. The beautiful peace of evening, descending from the blue peaks of the higher mountains, brooded over the meadow. Birds were chattering sleepily to each other among the trees.

"Listen," he said to her. "There is something in the world stronger than anything else—than pride or prejudice or a man's own self—it is love. Some day we will come back here together."

Those were the words she had been praying for. She looked up at him with a little tender cry.

"I have no pride," she said, "you are my strong man, I am the woman of your choice. That is all there is in the world. Take me away with you to your cave, wherever it may be."

"Do you mean it!" he said brokenly, "when

your world is waiting out there? It seems to me I'm mad to think I even heard you say—"

"I have no world. You have made me love you so—. Oh, look at me!"

She held out her hands to him and he looked down into the soul that had wakened from its slumber at his call. The light in her eyes blinded him, so that he seemed to stumble before it. Then he caught her once more in his arms, and the iron strength of his embrace told her that he would never let her go again.

"All ready," called Jose, a moment later.

"Come," said Strong to her.

They turned away from the meadow without a backward look, for now they carried its magic in their hearts and the light of the promised land was all about them. He led the way and she followed. After them came Annunciata with a bundle slung over her shoulder. It mattered little to her where she went. She would carry her bundle contentedly over mountain trail or salt marsh, so that she might lay it down at night beside Strong's camp-fire. Ethel, seeing the wrinkled, patient face, the adoring eyes that rested on Strong's advancing form, laid her arm about the woman's shoulders in a sudden, warm pressure.

Chapter XIV

AN exulting wind swept up the bay the next afternoon and greeted a party of five in the bow of an Oakland ferry with a shout of welcome. Forrest had left them at the junction, Jose had gone off gaily with the rangers. The familiar sea fog fled before the wind, rifting, swirling in front of them, half promising to reveal the hidden city their eyes were searching for so eagerly, again burying it more securely than before in its gray blanket.

"It will lift for good in a moment," said Strong.

"We'll see the Fairmount first," murmured Mrs. Onverell, "then the houses on Russian Hill, our house. And we thought it was all gone! What a moment!"

Then, before a stronger blast of the freshening trade wind, the fog began to lift again, thinning into a filmy veil, as if some kindly hand were delaying for them the inevitable moment of realization.

"There's the Ferry Building!" said Ethel leaning forward.

"And the dome of the City Hall!" cried Mrs. Onverell. "What—Why!"

The veil was withdrawn. Before them against the clear, pitiless sky, rose the tragic ruins of the

fire-swept city. The eastern slopes were an unbelievable waste, marked with isolated arches, columns, and broken walls. Above them towered the naked skeleton of the city hall.

"God!" said Onverell, "look at that!"

They stared incredulous, stunned. The shock was even greater than before, so complete had been their reaction. Onverell turned his head away from the sight, his wife sobbed openly upon his shoulder.

It was Strong who spoke first.

"The lower part of the city is gone, stores, hotels, warehouses—but look up beyond the hills—they must have stopped the fire there, all the outlying districts are saved."

His voice rang with excitement and Onverell turned his head to look. The boat, swinging a little to make its slip, showed them the long vista of ruins that had once been Market Street.

"God!" he said again—then, "there are men there, at work."

Light leaped into Strong's face like a flame. "It is magnificent!" he exclaimed. "Of course they're at work. Every able bodied man has work enough for him there to pour new life into his body—to set his soul free. Why, man, feel the call of it! Your city, my city in ruins, and you and I to help give it a different and far greater tomorrow. It's a new world after all, a world of unlimited possibilities. A clean slate for every-

body. For months, years, perhaps, men will be at their best, they'll show only the qualities that come to the surface in crises. It is magnificent!"

Onverell's eyes kindled with a faint glow. "It sounds so, the way you put it," he said.

Strong's head was lifted, his voice rang convincingly, he was once more the leader.

"I tell you we're going to live!" he said intensely, "live as we have never lived before, and life is going to be service as it ought to be. It's not any longer what the city can give to us, it's what we can give to it. And that's enough for any man."

"Look up, Mayme," said Onverell suddenly, "dry your eyes. Strong's right. We owe the old city something, and we're going to pay it. Do you see those streets there, stretching out toward the Golden Gate? We're going to find a little shack out there somewhere and live in it; we're going to begin all over again. And Mayme, —" he lowered his voice—"perhaps there'll be a child or two playing about the floor. We'll be poor enough now to afford them."

Under cover of adjusting her cloak Strong caught Ethel's hand.

"All I owned in the world was in one of those big warehouses near the water front. I have nothing—nothing. And now I dare to ask you to share it with me. Will you help me in the big fight ahead?"

She lifted to him a face perfectly happy, perfectly at peace. "Perhaps it will be a cave after all," she said.

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